The DAY'S JOURNEY

W. B. MAXWELL

THE DAY'S JOURNEY

BOOKS BY W. B. MAXWELL

Novels

SPINSTER OF THIS PARISH
FOR BETTER FOR WORSE
GLAMOUR
THE MIRROR AND THE LAMP
THE DEVIL'S GARDEN
GENERAL MALLOCK'S SHADOW
IN COTTON WOOL
MRS. THOMPSON
THE REST CURE
SEYMOUR CHARLTON
HILL RISE
THE GUARDED FLAME
VIVIEN
THE RAGGED MESSENGER
THE COUNTESS OF MAYBURY
THE DAY'S JOURNEY

Short Stories

LIFE CAN NEVER BE THE SAME
ODD LENGTHS
FABULOUS FANCIES

A Morality

A LITTLE MORE

THE DAY'S JOURNEY

BY

W. B. MAXWELL

"Is life, then, no more than a day's journey?"
"No more and no less."
"But who shall be my companion for the day's journey?"
"It does not matter. Chance will decide. And one may be as good as another, so that you both keep together till the journey's end."

—*Fables of an Eastern Land.*

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THE DAY'S JOURNEY

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THE DAY'S JOURNEY

CHAPTER I

THEY came to Beach End every summer; and people at the golf club, where they had been nicknamed "the inseparables," used to look out for them toward the end of July, saying, "I suppose we shall soon have old Wilfred Heber and Carrington Bird down again."

"The usual post-card hasn't arrived yet," the professional would say, with a cheerful grin, "but you'll see 'em sure enough before the Bank-holiday."

And sure enough, one did. There they were, on the course—the long, thin Heber and the shorter, much thicker Bird; generally delaying the players behind, but quick to shout "fore" to any dilatory players ahead; talking all the while, as if they had just met after a long separation and had therefore a great deal to say to each other; or suddenly beginning to squabble, and turning silent and morose, as if they wished never to meet each other again.

It should be explained at once that, although an institution, they were not a very popular institution. Members of the golf club said that Bird was a bore and Heber a nuisance. But allowances were made for them and a certain license granted to them, because at a time of financial trouble they had both come forward handsomely in support of the club. That, however, was a long while ago; and many members felt that the hour had

arrived for them to come forward handsomely again or somehow pay for a continuance of the toleration upon which both—but Heber especially—drew with such freedom.

They were old now—Heber quite sixty-two and Bird only two years younger. Their golf was little if at all worse than it had always been; they played badly, but with a wonderful equality of badness that made every match a near thing and maintained the zest and ardour of their innumerable encounters; and each of them would state in confidence from time to time that he had allowed the other to win.

"Well, Mr. Heber," said a lady member archly, from the club verandah at luncheon time, "who had the best of it to-day?"

"Birdie won," said Heber, looking round to see that his friend was out of ear-shot. "I let him. He was about five down, and his chagrin and mortification were so pitiable that I *had* to let him win. He never twigged."

"Well, what's the result?" asked the same lady at tea-time, as Bird, very hot and red, came up the verandah steps after a further combat.

"Oh, I let Heber take his revenge. I *had* to—for peace and quiet, you know. Old Wilfred gets the needle so fearfully if he's beaten twice in the same day." Then perhaps he paused to add a word or two as to the irksomeness of being compelled to play all his golf with Wilfred Heber. "He's not up to a second round really. He was coughing and wheezing like anything this afternoon."

Their squabbles were very annoying. These tiffs burst out in a moment, about anything or nothing; and, as far as one could judge, their real cause seemed to be sheer cantankerousness on the part of Heber and a time-old grievance festering in the breast of Bird.

Thus, after an apparently amicable morning round, one bright August day, they filled the dressing rooms with noise and strife. Lookers-on hated it, and said so. It was at once ridiculous and painful—these old fellows nagging at each other, storming at each other, in a semi-public place, like two schoolboys or schoolgirls. Heber was retrospectively upset by something that had occurred on one of the greens, and his hand shook with anger as he brushed his gray hair. Bird, unpleasantly hot and damp from exposure to a torrid sun, was changing his shirt and making a fearful revelation of baldness and fatness, together with a stomach which he kept carefully surrounded by a woollen band because he had once been in the East and dreaded chills. He puffed and blew, and snorted wrathfully, in the midst of his lamentable dishabille.

He said, with swelling, indignant satire, that henceforth he would not even breathe on a green; he would walk away a hundred yards from the green each time that Heber did a putt. And Heber said it was never too late to learn the etiquette of the game.

"Not from *you*," shouted Bird.

"Oh, *I've* given up attempting to teach you that, or anything else," said Heber.

So they went on, quickly becoming abusive, until the thing stopped because Heber had a fit of coughing and nearly choked.

Ten minutes later they came into the luncheon room and sat down at the general table as if nothing whatever had happened. Seen now, both of them placid and smiling, nicely washed and dressed, they seemed just such a pair of pleasant, friendly old buffers as you may meet by thousands at the seaside golf courses of England. And indeed, till quite the end of their meal, they made them-

selves unusually acceptable to the other people at the long board. Wilfred Heber, as was well known, possessed a fund of good stories, and his cynical, incisive style of telling them was effective. Carrington Bird had an explosive, contagious sort of laugh. At their best they were all right. What people dreaded was the querulousness of Heber and the long, maundering twaddle of Bird.

Outwardly Heber was one of those tall, lean, sallow-complexioned men whose dark hair goes gray early in life, and whose dark eyes take a permanent tinge of biliousness that robs them of their natural fire and merely allows them to glow or smoulder. His stoop and his cough suggested invalidishness. Bird was blond, bald, thick-set, with childishly blue eyes in a big pink face. He flushed readily.

When Heber grew querulous—as he did now at sight of the cheese—the lines of his dark face deepened, his eyes seemed to fade altogether, he became one long gloomy frown. Obviously he suffered anguish while the fit lasted; as if recognizing and admitting that destiny had defeated him, that the universe was against him, and that it was useless for him to struggle.

"It isn't as if decent English cheese was unobtainable, or illegal, or against mortality," he went on, as he became calmer. "Why, good heavens, there's not a caddy in the place, not a tramp on the high road, that isn't enjoying a better bit of cheese than that"; and he pointed brokenheartedly when the waiter approached. "Take it away? Yes, of course you can take it away. Why should I detain it? What do I want it for? You didn't—you surely didn't think I was going to *eat* it?"

Then, working backward through the menu, he deplored the futility of the apple tart, the catastrophe they had called Irish stew, and the flagrant, disgusting affront

that had been offered them by the sideboard of cold meats. After all, need one submit? One paid one's subscription—not to be poisoned or starved. Why not band together here and now, and implore some little consideration, some little mercy? Why not have the cook into the room and tell her what one thinks of her?

And throughout this gloomy, distressful lament, while he was rendering everybody uncomfortable, Bird twaddled cheerily, trying to make light of it; telling one the address of the only shop in London where you could buy the shoe-nails that he himself used, the price of his tobacco mixture per pound, the reason why the hats named bowlers are sometimes named Coke hats; or, worst of all, raking up the war again and narrating "another funny thing" that had happened to him during his service in France.

"Wouldn't it be possible to get rid of them?" somebody asked the secretary.

"Not without a general meeting of the club," said the secretary. It was a question he had often answered before now.

"Well, can't we have a general meeting?"

All unconscious of such questions and answers, the two old cronies had gone to the smoking room. Heber wanted to have coffee on the verandah; but Bird refused, preferring to keep in the cool, shaded room.

"Two coffees," said Heber to the waitress. "One for me outside; one for Mr. Bird in here." And he glanced fretfully at his friend, who was settling deep in an easy chair. "I suppose you mean to go to sleep?"

"Go to sleep?" echoed Bird, as if enormously surprised at the queerness of such an idea. "No, I want to read the *Times*."

But very soon he was asleep; lying back in the chair,

a dreadful sight, with his head on one side and his mouth wide open. Soon, too, he was snoring. Heber outside the open windows heard his snores, and smiled indulgently.

But a young man inside the room showed no indulgence with regard to Bird's piglike grunts and groans. He told another young man that he could not stand it at any price; and going to a corner of the room where three golf bags full of clubs had been left leaning against the wall, he toppled them over, so that they fell with a crash upon the boarded floor. Bird gave a startled squeal, and woke to see the two young men laughing at him.

Before he could say anything Heber came in from the verandah and furiously reproved the culprit for lack of respect to a man old enough to be his father, a member of fifteen years' standing, a personal friend of his own.

"Well, he was snoring," grumbled the youth. "I didn't know what to do."

"I know he was snoring," said Heber, shaking from anger. "I heard him plainly, and I raised no objection. If you objected——"

"*If* I objected! It was driving me mad."

"Then you should have roused him courteously, apologized for disturbing him, and explained that in his sleep he was inadvertently worrying other occupants of the room."

Heber concluded by calling the young man an unmannerly cub; and the young man said the usual sort of things, to the effect that Heber's gray hairs and debility protected him.

Heber went to the office of the secretary and lodged a formal complaint.

"An ill-bred young lout like that lets down the tone of the club, as well as rendering himself an intolerable nuisance to old members. He ought to be kicked out, or called on to resign. Is there no way of doing it?"

"Only by a resolution," said the secretary, "passed at a general meeting of the club."

"I am quite prepared," said Heber grandly, "to summon a general meeting; and I know very well that I can rely on the support of the necessary majority."

As they strolled out to the first tee, Bird thanked his friend for taking up the cudgels on his behalf.

"Yes," he said, "it was like you, Willy, to feel so indignant because you fancied those young puppies had insulted me." And he added good-humouredly, "But I don't think they really meant to be offensive. It was just silliness—youthful high spirits—what! I remember when you and I were their age——"

"Oh, if you enjoy being insulted," growled Heber, rather rudely, "there's no more to be said, and I was wrong to interfere."

"Of course I don't enjoy being insulted," said Bird, gulping. "No, I'm much obliged to you." Then he smiled again. "What baffles me is my falling asleep like that. I can't think what made me do it. I never do do it."

"How can you talk such dashed rot?" said Heber very rudely. "When you know you do it every day of your life, and after nearly every meal. And if you want to know why you do it, well, you do it because you overeat yourself—it's a sign of that and nothing else, and it leads to premature senility, apoplexy, and heaven knows what besides."

That was so curious. They disparaged each other, they spoke rudely to each other; but they were both in arms if they heard the other one attacked. They would brook no disparagement from outsiders.

At the Oceanic Hotel, where they occupied the same rooms every year—Bird's room being on the ground floor

at the back because he liked the convenience of getting in and out easily, and Heber's on the fifth floor at the front because he wanted air and insisted on a sea view—at this great, noisy, crowded place their idiosyncrasies had become as well known as at the quiet little golf clubhouse. Regular visitors laughed and joked about them. Strangers at adjacent tables soon observed their bickerings, and felt amused wonder. They were like some old married couple irrevocably bound together but smarting under the burden of their chains, incompatible of temper, with scarcely a taste in common, leading a cat-and-dog life from which only death could bring release.

This summer a girl and her grandmother at the Oceanic reported a real quarrel as having occurred on one of the benches behind the gravel tennis courts. At the end of it Bird had told Heber that he was going straight into the hotel to pack his things; and Heber had said that Bird might pack and go to hell for all he cared. Yet at dinner time, there they were, both of them, contentedly seated at their favourite little table in the huge bow window, cracking a bottle of champagne together as if to celebrate some piece of good news or an auspicious event.

It was in this same summer of 1922 also that Heber fell ill. One morning, early, the fifth floor chambermaid came down and told Bird that his friend was spitting blood. Bird despatched a frantic summons to the hotel doctor, and rushed up all the flights of stairs to the fifth floor. He could not wait for the lift.

"Have you had any warning of this?" asked the doctor.

"No, he has had none," said Bird. Bird answered all the questions. "He had slight lung trouble, or was threatened with it, thirty years ago; but since then nothing. He coughs a lot. In fact, the cough has been chronic."

Heber lay there, staring at them mournfully.

"Of course, he did the war, you know," said Bird. "And the hardships of it, at his age——"

"He did the war, too," said Heber, with an effort. "Went slap through it." Then he coughed.

The doctor looked at them both in surprise. "When the war began you were neither of you chickens."

"No," said Bird, "we were neither of us chickens. But he's older than I am—two years."

The doctor, talking as hotel doctors will talk, told people of Heber's appalling rudeness to Bird day after day, of the patience and devotion of Bird, his cheeriness and good temper. He never chipped back at the sick man; he spoke to the doctor in the corridor outside the sick room, as a mother might speak of a child who has been made fretful by infantile colic or teething trouble.

"Yes, doctor, the poor old chap is down on his luck. He can't help what he says, and naturally I don't mind. But he *is* on the mend, isn't he?" And Bird looked at the doctor with a piteous anxiety in his blue eyes. "You do really think I shall be able to take him home next week?"

The doctor had said it would be advisable to get the patient home as soon as he could be moved safely.

That young lady and her grandmother who had overheard the quarrel told the doctor about it, and learned from him about Heber's rudeness.

"I wonder why on earth they always go about together, quarrelling as they do," said the young lady.

"Well," said the doctor, "I suppose they're fond of each other."

"Fond of each other? How *can* they be?"

"Well, I suppose in some odd sort of way."

CHAPTER II

AT THE beginning they had been very fond of each other—quite in the ordinary way. They were boys together.

It was at a place in Hampshire where the younger boy lived with his parents and where the elder came to spend holidays with an aunt. Bird's first recollection of Heber was a darkly radiant, invincibly attractive smile; a prompt, magnanimous pardoning of the discrepancy in their years; and the instantaneous birth of this newly discovered rapture—companionship. They became at once of the same age, equals, friends.

Even now, the rotund and elderly Bird had but to shut his eyes to see again with amazing freshness the Hampshire landscape and feel again the joyous enthusiasm of this happy time. Any morning, as he swathed himself with his woollen belt, or wallowed and snorted like a white hippopotamus in his cold tub, that marvellous combined cinematograph theatre and gramophone museum which we carry inside our heads and call memory would give him back pictures, voices, sensations belonging to those early days, as vivid and strong as when they were originally recorded side by side with adolescent Heber—such as, for instance, a wood in spring time with lichen on the white stems of the trees, primroses, a patch of blue sky showing through budded branches, and a sensation of walking in fairyland; the sound of rustic voices, the throb and rattle of a thrashing machine, the first keen spell of the chase as he and Heber bolted rats in a farmyard; a

girl, at the gate of a thatched cottage, to whom they talked and by whom their pulses were stirred.

During that brief interview Bird realized without envy that Willy Heber must and would prove more successful in love than he himself could hope to be.

Their education separated them; but on approaching full manhood they came together again. Heber's father was a retired solicitor; he had peaceful and rather dusty rooms in the Albany, where he beguiled an otherwise vacuous leisure by writing or collecting materials for a "Life of Robespierre." Carrington Bird paying visits to the Albany loved the unusualness of this London household, and took great interest in the old man's bloodthirsty prints and documents; even the pervading dust, which frequently made him sneeze, was pleasant to his nostrils —as if it had been some magic sort of snuff, with youth, hope, and affection blended in its ingredients. Heber gladly paid return visits to his young friend's country home, enjoying the pure air, praising the wholesome food, and greatly appreciating the sensible business-like ways of Bird's father and mother. Moreover, they hunted together one whole winter with the Vine Hounds.

Some time or other they dropped their habit of writing long, affectionate letters, and communicated with brief, curt little notes—such as, "Any chance of seeing you in Hampshire this Christmas?" or "Why not run up to London for a few days?" Then, for no particular reason that either was aware of, even these unexpansive messages ceased to pass between them. Soon Heber began to eat his dinners at the Temple, and Bird went to Ceylon in order to learn all about colonial produce, and thus prepare himself for a place in his father's business. They had lost sight of one another.

When they met again it was by chance, and after several

years. In less than five minutes they exchanged all necessary information. Wilfred had left the Albany on the death of old Mr. Heber and was temporarily living at an hotel; all the materials of that unfinished "Life of Robespierre" were stowed away in deed boxes at a bank, and the dutiful son had thoughts of dragging them out one day and finishing the "Life" himself; he had been called to the bar, but as yet was not in large practice. Both the parents of Bird were dead; the Hampshire house had been sold; he had rooms in Jermyn Street and went every day, or nearly every day, to the house in the city of which he was now a partner.

"Bird, Dorling, and Company—colonial merchants—you know," said Bird; and he asked Heber to come and look him up at his office.

"Yes," said Heber, "and you must lunch with me at the Temple. Which way are you going now—west or east?"

"West," said Bird. "I want to get my hair cut."

"Well, I'm going east. But we'll meet again. Arrange something," said Heber carelessly. "Now we've run into each other like this, we must foregather."

They foregathered. They sought each other's company; for a considerable time they were again inseparable. Again they felt the charm of that ancient companionship. They were sufficiently well off, with nothing on earth to worry them, still comparatively young; and together they were able to revive the glamour of youth. Apart they could not do it. They felt the spell of idle, purposeless life, and succumbed to it. Bird went less and less to his office; Heber ceased even a pretense of sitting in court.

They had little dinners and luncheons of four; themselves and two girls—any two girls—girls provided by

Heber, who was amazingly masterful with girls and detached married women. To Bird was told off, as a rule, the plain one, the confidante, the hanger-on merely asked for propriety's sake, or to complete the quartette; but sometimes Heber, yielding to fantasy, seeing perhaps a wicked, distorted kind of seductiveness in the uglier of the pair, gave Bird the beauty. Bird did not mind which it was. He prattled joyously, perfecting himself in that art of inane conversation for which he was to be painfully famous during his later years. The glamour lay on everything; joy and contentment filled him, so that his satisfaction with the scene brightened and glorified its smallest details—the sunshine of May, or June at latest, pouring through the restaurant windows, that laurel in a tub on the balcony, these two charming, prettily dressed women, the white tablecloth, the clumsy plated cutlery, the waiter in an apron bringing the omelette, and down below, unseen but imagined, the happy, busy street. Beyond all else, dear old Heber.

Yet already Heber had begun to say wounding things that hurt Bird frightfully—the more so, because they were said in the presence of others.

Bird, flushing, said that he did not like it. Those young ladies had laughed at him, because of Heber's sneers.

"You're not sensitive, are you?" said Heber, surprised and serious. "Don't be sensitive"; and he told Bird that he himself had put on a sort of armour against the world, because he had been so often hurt by it. He had affected a callous cynicism in order to hide his sensitiveness—"When I began to find out that people didn't like me."

"My dear fellow," said Bird cordially, "everybody likes you."

"No." And Heber's sombre eyes had a wistful sadness.

"No. At first I wanted to be popular. I felt nothing but kindliness to everyone; I craved for a response from them—I laid myself out to win their regard. But now they may all go to the devil, for what I care. Believe me, Birdie, that's the only safe attitude to carry through life."

Bird protested and protested. He said that Heber was most popular—deservedly so.

Heber wound up by saying, "There is no one on earth except you that I could have said this to." Then for the first time he employed a turn of words that impressed Bird strongly. "This is something we will never speak of again"; and he offered his hand.

As the hands gripped and they looked hard at each other, they were boys once more—back in the wood among the primroses, or in the farmyard with the rats.

But it did not last.

Small things attacked and undermined their friendship, rendering it almost impossible. Bird adored the larger of his two London clubs, and could not rest until he had secured membership of it for his friend. As a guest, Heber had praised the club lavishly; as a member, he permitted himself some very destructive criticism. Bird, loving the club as he did, sometimes felt sore all over when the lately joined member was in a critical mood. Nevertheless they enjoyed many jolly hours there.

Then Bird retired from business, ceasing to be a partner of Bird, Dorling, and Company, washing his hands for ever of colonial produce, and becoming that which hitherto he had merely seemed to be—a gentleman at large. The Dorlings were glad to buy him out and be rid of him, and he was glad to be bought out and to go; but Heber took upon himself to lecture and criticize in a manner that gave offense.

Nor could Bird get over his displeasure. He kept out of Heber's way, and determined to drop him; feeling sad at the thought that nothing in life lasts permanently. After a dull evening spent at his other club, a small club that he disliked, he sat alone in his new sitting room, and wrote down on the first page of a diary or note-book the classical expression of the thought that impressed him. "*Tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe.* Example—W. H.!!!" While adding those three marks of exclamation with three firm pen strokes, he felt not only a rather bitter irony, but a perceptible strengthening of his resolve to have nothing more to do with W. H.

Reviewing their friendship, he saw plainly—or thought he saw—that Heber had never valued him. On the contrary, he had used him as a *pis aller;* coming to him to fill loose ends of time, chucking him always if he had anything better to do. And Bird felt that for his own self-respect he must stand firm, must nurse his resentment. He continued rigorously to refrain from using the beloved club where he would meet the man who had treated him so badly. He made up his mind, too, that when Heber wrote to him, he would answer coldly.

Heber never wrote. So it was now a real breach.

Then one day after many months Bird, walking alone, felt a sudden impulse. It came like a wave of emotion. It took force and purpose, changing from massive or voluminous discomfort into definite, sharp mental promptings, as though, from the deep, orders were being issued to him by his subconscious or better self. "Stop this nonsense. Go straight into the club and put things right with Heber."

He went there at once and asked the hall-porter if Mr. Heber was in the club. The porter said No, Mr. Heber had resigned his membership.

Bird drew back as if he had been given a blow with the porter's fist. He felt outraged. Heber's resignation was a direct insult to him.

Six weeks later they met by accident at the junction of Bond Street with Grafton Street, and at this public and much-frequented spot there occurred between them what in newspaper language is termed "a scene."

"Hullo," said Heber, aggressively and yet with a half laugh.

"I didn't see you."

"Or didn't want to see me?" said Heber.

"We haven't come across each other lately," said Bird, with an absurdly artificial manner. "What have you been doing?"

"Well, I've been ill—not that that's of the least importance to you, or to anybody else."

"Nothing serious, I hope," said Bird coldly.

"No," said Heber angrily. "Only lung trouble. The doctors say I'm touched—and won't last, unless I take care of myself." After saying this he coughed.

Bird felt a sharp twinge of compassion as he looked at Heber's hollow cheeks and the sallowness of his whole face, but in the same moment he had an intuition that Heber was trying to play upon his feelings. He had not really needed to cough.

Then soon they both grew warm; and Bird spoke of how insulting it had been to leave the club.

"Not at all," said Heber. "I considered it your club. You put me into it. And since the sight of me had become objectionable to you, it was the best thing I could do. Besides"—and he flamed in anger, so that passers-by looked at them curiously—"if it was insulting, and purposely so, it wasn't as insulting as not answering a fellow's letter—especially such a one as I sent you."

"I received no letter from you. When did you write a letter? Where did you send it to?"

Heber said he had sent it to Bird's old address in Jermyn Street.

"But I have left there for *ages*," said Bird, much troubled, and shaken with doubts. "I am over the fruiterer's in York Street. . . . Of course if you did really write—well, that would have made a great difference. They ought to have forwarded it to me. It was very wrong of them."

"You'd better get it now," said Heber. "Seeing's believing. Then you'll understand what I felt about it."

"I am sorry you left the club," said Bird, after a moment's silence.

"Yes," said Heber, smiling; "but, though I'm no longer a member, I can still be received as a guest. Why don't you ask me to dinner to-night?"

"I do ask you," said Bird.

"Enchanted to accept," said Heber. "I am quite at a loose end, and didn't know what the devil I should do this evening."

Bird winced. There it was—empty time to fill, a suggestion of making use, the doing of something because you have nothing better to do. This was Heber's old way.

But Bird hurried off to Jermyn Street, and was given the missing letter, together with half a dozen tradesmen's circulars and one or two small forgotten bills. As he read the letter, his heart melted in tenderness and his whole substantial body throbbed with yearning affection.

"I have not many friends in the world," Heber had written; "but I thought I had one, and I cannot afford to lose him without a struggle. Dear old Birdie, need this go on?"

So Heber had felt the same impulse that had come to

Bird, and he had acted on it—earlier, too, as was proved by the date of the letter. Bird felt ashamed now for being less magnanimous than Heber.

He ordered a really nice little dinner and fidgeted about in the hall of the club, waiting. The guest arrived, and Bird helped him off with his overcoat and neck wrap in the lobby; and there, among the hats and coats, Heber gave him one of those irresistible smiles out of the dim past, held forth his hand, and used their habitual boyish phrase.

"It's pax now, isn't it?"

It was pax. Yet perhaps the seeds of war still lingered in the oft-trodden battle ground. Heber, as it seemed, having won Bird, or recovered him, took no more trouble. He destroyed the force of that appeal which had wrought upon the compassion of Bird. He made light of his illness, vowed that he felt as fit as a fiddle. He was rude before the head waiter.

Soon it became again an armed neutrality. Bird began again to avoid Heber, not openly now but stealthily; and he knew that Heber was aware of the avoidance.

Heber made advances, tacitly pleaded for a further reconciliation, and asked Bird, as a favour, to go with him to see an old aunt, of whom Bird had never heard till now.

"As a favour. It's only to Sydenham. But I hate going alone."

"Your father's sister?"

"No, my mother's."

Bird went with him, on a dull November afternoon. The old lady had a commonplace sort of house, with far too much old-fashioned furniture, and just the sort of genteel female companion that you might expect to find

in such surroundings. But what Bird had not expected was the effusive welcome that he received from both of the old ladies. To his unutterable surprise he found that Heber had been talking about him for years and years. Singing his praises—as the companion put it.

"Yes, always talking of you," said the aunt, beaming at him fondly; "and always promising to bring you here. But never till to-day!"

"I'm afraid I must prove a great disappointment," said Bird fatuously.

"Oh, no—indeed no," said the aunt, laughing gently and nodding her white head. "Although no human being could come up to his picture of you. He puts you quite on a pinnacle."

They were chatting after they had drunk their tea, and Heber and the companion had left the room in order to visit a newly papered bed-chamber upstairs. Seizing this opportunity, the aunt begged Bird to make Wilfred take more care of himself.

"He never listens to what *I* say; but your lightest word will have such weight, such enormous influence. Oh, do please make him take care of himself. I shall be so very grateful. I am grateful already, of course. Mr. Bird, I can never thank you enough for all you have done for him. Indeed, without you, what would have become of him? Thank you, thank you"; and the old lady took his hand and pressed it. "Hush! No more now. They are coming back. . . . Wilfred dear, I want to show Mr. Bird the screen that your great-grandmother embroidered."

Bird was greatly touched by all this. It was more than a surprise, it was a revelation. Wilfred did value him—in an astounding, exaggerated fashion. He sang his praises behind his back. The discovery soothed and

cheered; it made sore places sound, it wiped out all secret rancour.

Bird made a firm resolution—*to put up with Wilfred Heber*, to accept him for what he was, to make the best of him. But he resolved also to obliterate all tenderness in their future relations, and if possible all memory of the past. And in fact their customary manner toward each other now settled itself in an irrevocable carelessness and abruptness. For instance:

"What are you doing this August, Birdie?"

"No plans yet, Willy."

"I was thinking of going to Beach End. Why not try it, too?"

"I'll think about it," said Bird curtly. "Is there a decent hotel?"

That was the beginning of their summer holiday habit.

When the aunt of Heber died he was left all that wealth of furniture, and he inveighed against it as a misfortune, fretfully declaring the furniture to be the most intolerable nuisance that he had ever had to deal with. He said the stuff was unsaleable, and he did not care to buy a house in order to store it.

"Unless," he said, very abruptly, "you'd care to set up house with me. There are some jolly villages up the estuary beyond Beach End."

"Doubtful experiment, what?" said Bird. "Two fellows making a joint household. Would it answer?"

"Why not?" asked Heber, with an angry glow lighting up his dark eyes. "Why not? D'you mean I'm not easy to get on with?" Then he smiled. "Rot, Birdie. Think of all the time we've known each other. That's the whole point—we're *used* to each other. I think it would be the greatest lark. I should love it."

"So should I," said Bird.

CHAPTER III

THEY found an absolutely adorable house in the village of Lippleford, which is just over four miles up the river beyond Beach End, and there they established themselves. A very capable wife and a very willing husband became their principal servants; a waiting maid came in every morning and went away at night; and a nice old charwoman paid them regular weekly visits. The installation was the greatest fun. Until all the furniture was arranged, curtains had been hung, and everything put in its place, they stayed at the little inn at the bottom of the village. Throughout this preliminary stage Heber was amazingly considerate to Bird, deferring to all his wishes, adopting without argument his every suggestion. The only passage of words that could be anyhow described as a tiff was a combat of generosity in regard to expenses. The bargain between them was that the costs were to be shared equally; but Heber insisted on throwing in the furniture for nothing, and Bird fought hard to be allowed to pay for all the carpets and bedding.

It was at dusk on an April evening that they walked up the village street from the Anchor Inn to have their first dinner at home and sleep under their own roof-tree.

They used that word "home" while Mrs. Dunn was removing the empty soup plates.

"No place like home, what?" said Bird. "It's jolly to feel that you have one, don't you know"; and he looked

round the comfortable lamp-lit room contentedly. "I call the whole thing a bit of all right."

"So do I, old chap," said Heber.

That night they talked to each other as they had not been able to do for years, not in those horrid short sentences, but openly and at length. Bird was more than conversational, he was philosophical; Heber let him run on without interruption, indeed encouraged him. He genuinely enjoyed the discursive flow.

It began by Bird explaining how surprised he had been to find that he was really dead tired of London. He had exhausted all its pleasures and amenities. He had worn them threadbare. Then in his delight at prattling thus unconstrainedly, with W. H. smiling at him on the other side of the cheerful wood fire, he released reflections of almost incredible triteness, such as:

"Believe me, Willy, without fresh air and exercise a man is never as fit physically as he is with them. . . . When one goes late to bed every night one never feels inclined to get up early, yet the early morning is often the best part of the day. . . . There is something about the country—I mean the real country—that you never find in a crowded town."

But far from protesting against this ecstasy of platitude, Heber continued to nod his head, saying cordially, "Just so," "Exactly," and so on.

The fact was that he felt a very great pleasure in seeing Birdie so pleased with the result of an idea that had been originally quite his own.

"No, give me the country," said Bird, returning to the subject an hour or two later, as he helped himself to whisky and water at a sideboard that he had first seen in that old lady's Sydenham villa. "When you get to my age, Willy——"

"But I have got there, old boy—and past it," said Heber, laughing.

"I know," said Bird. "I'll put it like this. When two fellows are forty-five and forty-three respectively, they don't want to go on racketing about for ever. Especially in the case of one of them, Willy—in *my* case"; and he, too, laughed. "I'm glad to be settled—to have my odds and ends about me, to know that I have a permanent place to be at peace in. For there's no getting away from the fact, I consider myself a confirmed bachelor."

"What about me?" asked Heber, screwing up his face whimsically. "Aren't I one, too?"

Bird looked at him with a slightly wistful expression on his broad pink face. "Don't you think you'll ever marry, Willy?"

"It isn't a matter of *thinking*, Birdie. I *know* I shall never marry."

"Haven't you ever felt drawn to it?" asked Bird.

"If I have, I've been quick to draw myself back in the opposite direction. No, to begin with, my temper is too uncertain for marriage—I mean, to make a woman consistently happy."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"And I have yet to meet a woman likely to make me consistently happy."

"I believe you're right," said Bird, with heartiness. "It's too much of a risk—at the best. At the worst—well, of course it would be simple martyrdom"; and, as with displays of fireworks on occasions of public rejoicing, Bird finished his conversational efforts and closed the evening by the discharge of a glittering bouquet of truisms.

"No doubt, a good wife is in many respects the greatest comfort to a fellow, but a bad wife is the very devil. And

the bother is you can never really know which sort you have got until you have married her, and then it is too late. . . . The thing that marriage takes from a bachelor is his liberty. . . . On the other hand, an unmarried man when he gets old and finds himself without a wife and children is apt to feel a bit lonely. . . . His pals—the pals he was fond of—may have passed away. He is then left alone in the world at the very time that he most needs company. To my mind, the whole thing is a matter of pro and con. He must be one thing or the other. He can't be both."

"Both what?" asked Heber, whose thoughts had at last wandered.

"Why, a married man *and* a bachelor," said Bird. "I mean, he has to make his choice. And I personally choose the liberty—the freedom—the absence from worry."

"So do I," said Heber, getting up from his easy chair and stretching himself.

He was visited by Bird before he had finished dressing next morning. Bird, very pink and gay, very alert, and almost roguish of manner, lured him, half dressed as he was, out of his room and along the passage—to show him something.

It was the view from the little window on the staircase.

"I wanted you to see it before the light changes," Bird explained. "Isn't it just like a water-colour drawing?"

And indeed, if an obvious, this was not an inapt description, assuming that the artist who made the sketch was a master of his craft. You looked out over the broad still water to the low banks of sand that lay between the estuary and the open sea; some spots of delicate carmine and purple were tiled and slated roofs at Beach End glittering faintly in the delicious April sunshine; the

whole picture was delicately indicated rather than solidly presented, with little pencil marks for the masts of ships, and the white paper left untouched in one place to give you the illusion of cliffs with the sunlight full upon them six miles away.

"Like water colours, isn't it?" said Bird. "They never seem to get that effect with oils. I don't know why. Perhaps merely because of the oil." He was rubbing his hands together with the innocent gleeful gesture of a small child. "I say, Willy, isn't it all ripping? I mean not only that—the view—but the house, the life we're going to lead here, everything." Then he said that Willy must be quick and come to breakfast, because Mrs. Dunn was cooking some exquisite dabs that had been caught since midnight. And suddenly adopting the attitude of a pugilist he pretended to punch Heber in the ribs. Then he went jumping down the stairs, and Heber heard him in the dining room singing a music-hall song slightly out of tune.

Bird was happy.

In this bright flickering weather of springtime there was a joyousness in the air that one seemed to absorb by the mere act of breathing. They went fishing nearly every day, with Dunn, their handy man, in the boat to help them and save them unnecessary toil. They carried their lighter baskets through the patch of sloped garden, down the cobbled street, to the small stone pier; and they called to each other from the boat about the tackle, the bait, the luncheon. They wore dreadfully shabby old clothes, jackets that had been withdrawn even from golf as too far gone, trousers that acquired new stains which could scarcely show among the old ones, battered, absurd straw hats; yet beneath all these outward symbols of age and wear and tear, in spite of tobacco smoke, loud voice, and

almost elderly fussiness, they had become younger than mere boys—two children.

"All on board, Willy?"

"Yes, I think so. Where's the beer? Yes, here we are. Hop in, old chap."

They hoisted their lug sail, and drifted or were gently swept away on the calm sun-lit surface. The long, long hours glided more swiftly than the boat. Sometimes they filled their baskets, sometimes the fish would have nothing to do with them. They did not really mind, although Dunn's heart was nearly broken. They stayed out late to give Dunn every possible chance, and came home when sunset had faded into night, when the distant town had shone as a heavenly vision in the last fiery glow, then abruptly vanished, and lamps were twinkling their kindly welcome from windows of the village street.

They were both of them happy. They were happy because they were together.

They knew really that this was the reason; but although once or twice they hinted at it, they never said so explicitly.

As well as the dining room there were two other sitting rooms, one for each of them. It had been a part of their bargain that each should have a room "where he could be to himself when he wanted," and the rooms were called Mr. Heber's and Mr. Bird's by Mrs. Dunn and the girl who dusted them. As yet these rooms were little used by the owners, and Heber suggested that they should be given different titles.

"Why not call yours the smoking room?"

Bird agreed at once, merely pointing out that as they smoked all over the house it would be a purely ceremonious name.

"And would you mind," said Heber, with a shyness

that he could not conceal, "if I called mine the writing room?"

"Of course I shouldn't mind. But what a rummy notion. The writing room! Why the writing room? You aren't going to write in it, I suppose."

Heber admitted that this was his intention or hope. He said he had always felt it as a sort of pious duty to finish the "Life of Robespierre" that had occupied his father's last years. He proposed to get those deed boxes from the bank and set to work.

"Not now, Birdie. But later—on winter evenings, you know. Give one something to do."

Bird applauded the plan.

"Splendid. I admire you for thinking of it. How far had the dear old chap got with the job?"

"Well, he'd broken the back of it," said Heber. "He had collected and arranged his materials—that's the great thing."

"And how much had he written—I mean, how many chapters of it?"

"Well, he hadn't started the actual writing of it."

Bird whistled, and said "By Jove!" He added that, to his mind, the actual writing would be no light matter in a task of such magnitude—more especially to anybody, however gifted, who was not a regular professional or well-practised writer.

But Heber then confessed that from time to time he had dabbled in literature, writing an occasional article for the evening papers.

"Do you mean that the articles were published—in print?" cried Bird; and when Heber said that this was so, he launched forth in praise and admiration. "Upon my word, you are a knock-out, Willy. You do a thing like that—that anybody would be justly proud of—and you

never say a word to a soul—not even to *me!* You *are* the most wonderful fellow."

And kindling more and more to the splendour of the achievement that Heber was about to set himself, he talked much of next winter.

"Yes, you take up your pen, and drive on with it. Perhaps I'll hit on some hobby for myself. I might get a lathe. I'll think of something. How jolly it will be in the long winter evenings."

But alas, those long winter evenings were not to come to them.

The great heat of August and September made them languid, and disinclined for whole-day expeditions, so that they rarely set forth upon the water until Bird had lunched and slept. One gorgeous afternoon, as they were lounging down to the boat, the sound of voices in a garden arrested them. It was at the house of Mrs. Padwick, who was reputed to be the best lodging-house keeper in the village, and the level of her garden—a flat square of grass with a border of sunflowers and hollyhocks—lay above their heads, on top of the stone wall, as they stood down below on the cobbles, listening and wondering what they ought to do. Stone steps, cut deep into the banked earth, led one up into the garden.

As well as the sound of girlish voices, there had been the sound of a small mowing machine. Quite obviously Mrs. Padwick's lady lodgers were trying to mow the grass and failing.

"Oh, I wish we could get somebody to help us," said one of them again. It was her saying it the first time that had made Bird stop short. Then there was some laughter, another whirr of machinery, and the same voice said, "How sickening! The beastly thing won't work."

"It's the mowing machine," said Bird, in a portentous whisper, and as if Heber had been stricken with deafness. "It must be out of order—because they say they can't make it work."

"Yes, I heard," said Heber.

Then without further ado he and Bird went up the stone steps to the little gate on top, and pausing there, offered their assistance.

A sudden hush fell upon the garden, and five pairs of feminine eyes were fixed upon their faces. Then somebody said, "It's most awfully kind of you," and they pushed the gate and went in.

Bird, aware at once that all these people of the other sex were really ladies, not common tourists merely pretending so to be, and feeling also that there was something unconventional, almost dashingly adventurous or romantic, in his intrusion upon their privacy, became embarrassed, and very voluble. Chattering inanely, he possessed himself of the troublesome little mowing machine, grovelled upon the ground with it, while Heber stood by darkly dignified, and the young ladies said it was too good of them both. Bird, stealing furtive glances in the midst of his toil, soon habituated himself to the surrounding bevy, and grew calmer of spirit and gayer of tone.

There were three girls and two elderly ladies—one sitting in a basket chair, and the other standing in the wooden porch of the house, watching, and knitting.

One of the girls—the one who seemed to lead or direct the rest—was addressed as Evelyn. She appeared to be a largish, darkish, jolly sort of girl. Another of them, called Daphne, was small and fair, one of those highly strung nervous little creatures that seem to vibrate with excitement and give one the idea of a not too strong

kettle that is always on the boil. Bird, with his eyes low down, near the rusty knives of the mowing machine, saw that she could not keep her feet still. She stood first on one leg then on the other. The lady knitting in the doorway was Mrs. Fawcett. She said at once that she feared Bird would cut himself.

"What I'm afraid of," she said again, while knitting assiduously, "is that he'll cut himself with the knives."

The others took very little notice of her, but she went on talking. She had a pleasant voice, quite unemotional in its character; but she somehow made one understand that she considered this world of ours a very ridiculous place, and that its inhabitants, so far as her experience had gone, always behaved ridiculously.

"It's extremely obliging of him," she went on; "but I cannot see why he should be troubled about it."

"I promised Mrs. Padwick I'd mow the lawn for her," said the one they spoke to as Evelyn.

"How can you call it a lawn?" said Mrs. Fawcett. "Besides, as to promising Mrs. Padwick—Mrs. Padwick would much prefer you to leave the grass alone. You know she hid the mowing machine behind those bicycles, so that you shouldn't find it. And such a hot afternoon, too. You'll be sorry when this kind gentleman has cut himself."

"Oh, if that's what you're thinking of," said Bird, courteously but very firmly, "don't be afraid of *that*."

"I know we're giving you a fearful lot of trouble," said the third girl, who had not spoken till then.

"Yes, it's most awfully kind of you," said Miss Evelyn, stooping over him to watch. "Of course mowing the grass doesn't really matter; but we'd *said* we'd do it—and it's so hateful being prevented after we'd once started. One doesn't like to be beaten."

"No," said Bird cheerily, "one doesn't like to be beaten. . . . And we *won't* be beaten," he added with determination.

Then, almost immediately, he cut himself.

That was a great affair. The vibrating young lady pounced upon him, took charge of him, and it was made known at once by the others that Daphne had done a course of hospital training. They whirled him into the house—Mrs. Fawcett drawing aside from the threshold, quite unperturbed, still knitting, and generously refraining from a single "I told you so." They took him through the house into the kitchen beyond, where Mrs. Padwick greeted him as a well-known local resident and made polite inquiries after the health of his housekeeper, Mrs. Dunn.

Bird's wound was not of course dangerous, and as soon as this fact had been established there was a great deal of chatter and laughter in the kitchen. Only Miss Daphne remained very serious, with her little face pale, drawn, and hard, and her whole body throbbing, while she washed him at the sink and subsequently stitched a white linen shroud round his injured finger. Washing him was real work, because his hands were in a disgusting mess with black oil, yellow rust, and green chopped grass.

Heber, leaning against the kitchen dresser, talked to Miss Glover. That proved to be the surname of the dark tall Evelyn. Turning from Heber once, she told Bird that she should never forgive herself; and something unexpectedly deep and musical about her voice, heard thus within the four walls of the kitchen instead of in the open air, set Bird thrilling, and he ungratefully broke loose from his surgeon-nurse and hopped across the kitchen floor as if the other girl had pulled him away with an invisible string.

"It is *I*," he said volubly, "who sha'n't forgive myself, if you don't forgive yourself—for being so clumsy and stupid."

"What's this? Are you accusing Miss Glover of being clumsy and stupid?" said Heber, smiling, and looking not at his friend but at the girl.

"Of course I wasn't," said Bird, flushing. "Certainly not."

"It sounded like it," said Miss Glover, laughing.

"I put things so badly—I always do," said Bird, in an odd sort of confused enjoyment. "What I mean is—consider me kneeling at your feet, Miss Glover, humbly craving pardon. Really, upon my word, I don't know how to express——"

All this time Mrs. Padwick had been going in and out of the kitchen, preparing afternoon tea for her lodgers; and now Mrs. Fawcett came to the kitchen door and announced that the meal was ready.

Both Bird and Heber said something to the effect that they could not further trespass; but their modest objections were overruled, Mrs. Fawcett observing that they deserved a cup of tea after all they had gone through.

It was a schoolroom kind of tea, the company all sitting round a table, a jolly, chattering business at which one promptly found out who was who. Miss Glover was Miss Glover; Daphne was Miss Yates; the third girl, reddish of hair, with blue eyes, a few freckles, and a rather solid figure, was a Miss Amy Steel. She seemed to be slightly lymphatic in temperament. The second elderly lady was Mrs. Tomlin or Toumlin. She suffered from rheumatism—as Bird understood when, thinking she had dropped something on the floor and trying to assist her, he found she was only rubbing her knee. Curiously enough, nobody was a relation of anybody else; they were

merely close friends who often went away together as a party.

They knew all about Heber and Bird, both by sight and fame. They said they envied them as possessors of that dear old house and the beautiful boat.

"The only thing we didn't know," said Evelyn Glover, with a gay audacity that enchanted Bird, "was which of you was which."

"But you know now?" cried Bird delightedly.

"Yes," said Evelyn, laughing, "we knew as soon as you called Mr. Heber Heber, and he called you Bird."

This easy, light-hearted badinage was very pleasant to Bird; he expanded under its stimulus and overflowed with appropriate chat—so much so that he felt annoyed when, toward the end of the meal, Mr. Dunn appeared at the open window of the room and interrupted him. Dunn came to report that they had missed the tide, the river had nearly emptied itelf, and their boat was now on the mud. He explained lengthily through the window that for a long time he had been somewhat alarmed by the mysterious disappearance of his two patrons, and then the sight of their baskets and tins lying in the public roadway beneath Mrs. Padwick's garden wall had given him a hopeful clue.

After tea the three young ladies graciously consented to stroll with their visitors to the bottom of the village and to look at the boat. Then somebody suggested a walk along the mud and sands by the water's edge. It seemed to Bird, going down the cobbles and again when they moved away from the stone pier, that Miss Glover, who was the acknowledged leader and chieftain of the little band, showed a willingness to walk by his side and hear more of his conversation; but chance seemed to frustrate this arrangement. All at once she was walking

forward briskly with Heber, and they walked right away from the others. Bird, as he chatted, watched their two figures growing smaller and smaller. Then, with a sudden inexplicable sense of satisfaction and relief, he saw them turn and come walking back again as briskly as they had gone. And once more he seemed to divine that —in a sort of reshufflement of positions taking place on the wet sands—Miss Glover was ready to accept him as her special escort for the homeward journey. She stood looking at him, and then they all moved at the same moment—she going on ahead with Heber.

Bird dismissed his transient imagining of a tacit invitation as vainglorious, and presently gladdened Miss Daphne and Miss Amy by throwing flat stones and making splendid ducks and drakes across the shallow water.

Then one of these young ladies lagged behind and he found himself walking alone with the other. It was the silent, slightly lethargic Miss Amy Steel. To his surprise she became quite talkative.

"Do you admire Eve?" she asked him.

"Eve?" he echoed blankly.

"Evelyn Glover. We call her Eve—among ourselves. Do you think her pretty?"

"Well, you know," said Bird uneasily, feeling as if he was being tickled and might sneeze, "I haven't thought about it. I think she's very jolly; fond of fun, too. Yes, I suppose she *is* pretty in a way. She struck me at once as a *taking* sort of girl." He said this very earnestly, and repeated it. "Yes, taking!"

This seemed to give Miss Steel great pleasure. She applauded him, and repeated the word herself. "Yes," she said, with fervour, "that exactly describes her. Evelyn is *taking*." Then after mentioning her intense personal regard for Miss Glover, she told him in a burst of

confidence that Miss Glover was an orphan and very poor, and would therefore presumably marry some one for his money—probably the first man who asked her. And then, glancing backward, Miss Steel began to relate how Daphne had passed through an unhappy love affair and was very miserable about it.

But somehow Bird had lost interest now that the tale concerned Miss Yates instead of Miss Glover.

He and Heber bade adieu to their new friends outside Mrs. Padwick's garden steps, and attacked the gentle climb toward their own home in silence. Heber spoke first.

"Well," he said moodily, "we have wasted the afternoon with a vengeance."

"Absolutely," said Bird. "But it was amusing—in a way. Anyhow, it has been a change."

CHAPTER IV

EVELYN GLOVER, called Eve by her intimates—there was something ominous in that name. Eve, in their Garden of Eden—but, alas, only one Eve, and two Adams.

Bird soon knew that he was bowled over, but he had no suspicion that Heber had been knocked down also. He was made aware of it in his own case by the rush of new strange thoughts, by his blasphemous frenzy when bad weather caused a postponement of the first boating excursion, and by his inability, whether it was wet or fine, to keep away from the cottage of Mrs. Padwick.

Moreover, he had a feeling that all those ladies, his new friends, were extraordinarily real to him; much, very much more so than any people he had ever known till now. Daphne's nervous excitability, the slow drawling emphasis of Miss Steel's voice, seemed to have been with him always; and if he had watched Mrs. Toumlin rub her rheumatic knee for many years, if he had been acquainted with her and her malady in a previous existence, she could not have been a more familiar sight.

Then they all faded, leaving only Evelyn Glover. They became mere ghosts, while she grew more and more tremendously alive—while she grew to be like life itself, the source of universal life without which other things cannot go on living.

"But I mustn't give way to this," he muttered to himself, going to bed at night. "It's ridiculous."

Dressing of a morning after an agitated almost sleepless night he examined himself in the glass; not seeing, of course, the Bird that the glass showed, nor yet the Bird that he would have liked to be, but some sort of composite picture that he recognized as fairly Birdlike and that he believed to be what he was offering for the consideration of Miss Glover. He sighed as he himself considered it.

"A girl of that sort would never look at me."

Then he remembered that she had in fact looked at him, remembered also what Miss Steel had told him about her being willing to marry anybody who asked her. He staggered away from the glass, and sat upon the edge of his bed panting breathlessly. Sudden wild delicious hope made him feel as if, after a dangerous motor accident, he had been plunged into a hot bath and had there discovered that no bones were broken.

Why not? He was trying in vain to recall a well-known poetic quotation. "He either fears his fate too much—or else his personal merits are small, who will not somehow have a try to gain or lose it all." Those, as he knew, were not the exact words, but they contained the idea. For a little while they gave him comfort and courage. Why not?

He was very particular about his costume now. All those disgraceful old jackets and the battered hats had been abandoned; he wore only the gems of his wardrobe, and changed the array twice or thrice between breakfast and dinner. On the afternoon of the great water-picnic he took a full hour to dress, and at the end of it he had made himself so smart that he was afraid to go downstairs and face Heber. Willy would chaff him.

It was a gorgeously fine afternoon, the sun streaming into the bedroom, the lace curtains flapping joyously; and Bird in his wonderful newest heather mixture, violet

tie, and brogued shoes, stood near the window, with golden fire playing all round him, overwhelmed by shyness.

Heber's voice called to him from the garden below. Heber shouted that he could not wait any longer; he was going on ahead. The ladies would think it rude if they got to the pier and found no one there to receive them.

"I'll follow—I'll follow," shouted Bird.

Then in a paroxysm of diffidence and perplexity he changed his clothes again. He tore off the heather mixture, cast it from him piece by piece to the corners of the room, and threw himself into a gray flannel suit, finally lighting himself up with a neat spotted necktie. This apparel was better. Not so significant. Less like an ardent declaration, addressed to one person, but perhaps to be overheard by all the world.

He was warm when he reached the little stone jetty; slightly puffing and blowing, too, as much from emotion as from the violence of his recent exercise. The ladies were there. He waved his hat to them gaily and then stopped short, under the shock given to him by the aspect of Heber. Heber was "dressed to the nines"; Heber, in white duck trousers, white boots, and a vivid blue coat, looked like some splendid yachtsman on the Royal Yacht Squadron landing-stage at Cowes.

They had provided themselves with two boats for this excursion, their own and another that Dunn had hired for them, and Heber was to be captain of one boat, Bird of the other. A question arose immediately as to which of the boats Miss Evelyn Glover was to go in; and while this matter hung in the balance Bird saw Heber's face. It was pale and haggard, with a spasmodic distortion that seemed to flicker on it in the sunlight—the face of a haunted man, the face of a suffering man.

Then, and only then, poor Bird realized the magnitude of the disaster. They had both fallen in love with the same girl.

"Well, I am waiting for my orders," said Evelyn, with a death-dealing smile.

After that, things were said that Bird could not hear—or rather, he heard them but failed to catch their meaning. Mrs. Fawcett was speaking, Miss Steel, too, they all seemed to be speaking at once; and he had another glimpse of Heber's face—composed now, dark and dignified, yet with a glow of inward fire. It had been decided that Evelyn was to go with Heber.

For Bird, that moment was the death of hope and the birth of despair. He felt cold in the sunlight; the sparkle and glitter of the dancing wavelets grew faint; curtains of black gauze descended swiftly on the whole smiling scene. What possible chance could he have against such a competitor? He thought of Willy Heber's almost mysterious power over young women, the serpent-like charm that he had seen at work again and again, the irresistible, effortless fascination that subjugated female breasts and rendered the whole of womankind possible victims if Willy chose to make them so. Bird revolted against this abominable treacherous rivalry, thinking, with an intolerable bitterness of spirit, it was the false friend and not blind fate that should be blamed. It seemed to him that, deep down in himself, he had always known how one day Heber would do him an irreparable injury; would creep closer and closer to him, lulling him and snaring him to be completely off his guard, and then with a flash of an unseen knife stab him to death. Thought is so rapid that all this and much more passed through Bird's mind in really less than a moment.

He rallied himself gallantly, as he handed Mrs. Faw-

cett down the stone steps and put her into his boat—instead of Evelyn.

"Oh, but let me have Mrs. Toumlin, too," he cried wildly.

"Do you really want me?" said the old lady skittishly.

"Yes, I do," he shouted, with noisy enthusiasm. "Come along"; and he assisted her down the steps, allowing her to pause and rub her knee before he and Dunn hoisted her over the gunwale. "Now jump in, Dunn. Ha, ha. What a lark it is! . . . Oh, I beg your pardon—ten thousand apologies."

He had given Miss Amy Steel a nasty bang with the boat-hook. He did not know that she had followed him down the steps and was close behind him.

"Oh it doesn't matter," said Miss Amy Steel quietly and drawlingly, although with a perceptible moisture in her eyes, brought there by sharp pain. "I'm not really hurt. It—it only stung a little—because you just caught me on the elbow. The funny bone, don't they call it?"

"The funny bone! Ha-ha," said Bird hysterically. "But no fun. Dear Miss Steel, please forgive me. Are you coming with us?"

"Yes, if I may—if you're sure I sha'n't be in the way."

"In the *way!* Ha-ha. Tons of room. Where's Miss Yates? She must come, too. I want you all—that is, except Miss Glover. I mean, she is booked already, you know."

But little Daphne Yates was in the other boat, which had now begun to glide from the pier. She was giving excitable aid to Heber as they raised the lug sail, while Evelyn, queenlike, sat at the stern and held the tiller. It was a faster boat than Bird's overloaded tub; it glided, it glided farther and farther away.

The boats did not come alongside again till they reached

their destination on the other shore. Heber had lowered the sail, and like a man in a dream was staring at Evelyn.

"You're very gay, all of you," said Evelyn, looking at Bird.

"Yes," said Mrs. Fawcett, "Mr. Bird has kept us amused famously."

"We heard you all laughing," said Evelyn; and she turned her head away.

Oh, the cruelty of it, the unbearable cruelty of it. While she spoke, until she ceased to look at him, she was to Bird like water to a man dying of thirst. He drank her, he drew her in at the pores, he bathed in her. Her panama hat threw its shadow on half her face; the exquisite line of her averted cheek was sharp against the sunlight, she seemed to him not really a girl at all, but the concentrated reincarnation of all the nymphs, goddesses, or queens, that have destroyed men by the hopeless love of them since fable and fact first came together on this planet of ours.

"Mr. Bird is really in splendid form," said the other old lady, Mrs. Toumlin.

And truly Bird was brave and staunch that afternoon. He made the beech woods ring with his explosive laughter when they had found a suitable spot for the picnic tea and Daphne was boiling the kettles. He helped her, he chaffed her. At the meal he sat between Mrs. Fawcett and Mrs. Toumlin. His flow of merry conversation never ceased. He was the life of the party.

The thing ended at last. Safe at home, Bird once more changed his clothes. He put on one of his awful old golfing jackets, took the collar stud out of his shirt, letting the tie sag loose with the neck open, and he came down to dinner thus attired. This costume symbolized

his state of mind. Nothing henceforth mattered; all was over.

Heber, still in the yachtsman outfit, was very silent at dinner, and when he spoke it was diffidently, even hesitatingly. He ate scarcely anything, but sat crumbling his bread and now and then glancing across the table at Bird.

But Bird would not, could not look at him. Only once or twice stretching a hand for condiment or wine, he saw, unavoidably, that same expression which he had observed on Heber's face hours ago. Heber seemed to be suffering. Why? Remorse? Bird's heart hardened.

"Are you going round there?" asked Heber after dinner, when Mrs. Dunn had cleared the table.

"Going round where?" Bird demanded fiercely.

Heber did not answer.

"Oh, you mean down the street to see our friends," Bird went on. "No, I'm not. But don't let me prevent you," and he gave a queer kind of suffocating snort. "I'm tired—and bored, too, if you want to know—yes, thoroughly fed up. So, with your permission—if you'll be good enough to grant it—I'll sit here and read my book." While he said this last sentence, in a stilted, unnatural style, he was selecting a volume from their dwarf bookcase. "You skip along and get on with it," he continued, with a grating laugh. "Strike while the iron's hot. Don't lose a minute—no, not half a minute." He no longer knew what he was saying. He opened the book and sat down in his customary armchair, turning his shoulder to W. H., and glaring at the page on which flames of anger danced and spurted. His cheeks were purple; he breathed stertorously.

Heber in silence seated himself at the other side of the empty fireplace.

"Well," said Bird presently, with a terrific snort, "why don't you go? Somebody's waiting for you, isn't she?"

And there was another silence, during which Bird still pretended to read and Heber sat in a huddled attitude, staring at the floor, and with his long thin hands dangling loosely. He coughed before he spoke again.

"Birdie," he said in a low voice; and he made a deprecating gesture with one hand.

"What the devil," said Bird loudly—"Why can't you leave me alone?"

And then, seated thus on each side of their devastated hearth, they had it out.

"Birdie, you must really let me talk to you."

"Why?"

"Well, because I am very unhappy about all this"; and there was a break in Heber's voice that affected Bird strangely. "It's pretty awful anyhow. But we mustn't make it worse by letting it come between us."

"Oh, I see what you're driving at now," said Bird idiotically; and he made some noises in his throat and laughed before saying any more. He spoke then as if Heber had been a mere acquaintance who desired to discuss a small matter of business. "Your uneasiness, my dear fellow, is quite beyond my control. But as to our quarrelling—that's absurd. You know the proverb. It takes two to make a quarrel; and I can assure you that, so far as I am concerned——" Instead of finishing the sentence he shrugged his shoulders, and, endeavouring to snort again, made but a feeble affair of it this time. Heber's voice, so humble, so appealing, Heber's forlorn attitude, a hundred memories of the past—these things were affecting Bird, sapping his strength. The blood had ebbed from his cheeks, that volcanic sensation of righteous anger clamouring for release had gone. With

a great effort he resumed his formal, yet aggressive, tone. "Everybody must judge their own actions. Some people have an exaggerated idea—I dare say—of loyalty to a friend, or call it chivalry, if you like."

"Birdie," said Heber pleadingly.

"Or decent feeling, if it comes to that."

"That's not kind of you, Birdie. No, you oughtn't to say this."

"But, good gracious"—and Bird lapsed from formality —"what's the use of jabbering about it? I've nothing further to say to you—or to her either. Great Scott, why should I? I suppose a girl has a perfect right to choose the husband that pleases her best."

"But she hasn't chosen yet," said Heber.

Truly, had they thought of one side of the question, it was wonderful, fantastic, that they should be using such words to each other, and without the least prelude or apology. Here, in this very room, such a little while ago, they had both declared that they would never, never have anything to do with marriage. They had weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the married state, and irrevocably decided in favour of bachelorhood. Yet now they implied, they seemed to take it for granted, that as soon as an opportunity comes every sensible man wants to get married.

"She *hasn't* chosen," Heber repeated. "I have made no declaration to her."

"I haven't either," said Bird.

"But this afternoon, coming down the hill behind all of you, I said more to her than I intended. Birdie, I couldn't help it—she seemed to tear it out of me. Just being by her, so close to her, with nobody overhearing——"

"I know what you mean," Bird mumbled.

"But I stopped myself, Birdie. What I said to her

was everything, and yet it was nothing—it could be understood or not. It was non-committal. She must now expect me to say more—and yet if I don't, she can't blame me. For I stopped myself—just in time. I thought of you, my dear old Birdie."

"Oh, you did think of me, Willy? That was good of you."

"I pulled myself up. I was determined to get at your real feelings first. I didn't know that you—I was only afraid—till to-night, old chap. But now I think I see how it is. Tell me, Birdie."

Bird was too agitated to speak. He left his armchair, and returned to it with the tobacco jar. This he put between his stout knees, holding it there while he began to fill his pipe.

"Willy," he said, "I have wronged you. Your last remarks make me ashamed of myself. It's like this. I did think—I own it frankly—I did think that you'd never given me a thought—that you'd left me out of the calculation altogether—as if I simply didn't count, and wasn't worth troubling about. Well, it was that—from *you*—that made me a bit crisp with you. Yes, it was only that that made me stuffy just now."

"Only that?" echoed Heber sadly. "Dear old boy, I wish I could believe it was only that."

"You may," said Bird; and he filled his pipe vigorously. "Now it's your turn. Just tell me—with complete frankness. You're fond of her, Willy?"

"Fond!" said Heber with a groan. "Fond! Bird, she's got me, soul and body. It's awful, it's appalling"; and he got up and walked about the room, waving his arms. His face twitched. That distortion of anguish was understood by Bird well enough now.

Heber walked to and fro, groaning and raving. He

said he worshipped the girl, she was the universe—nothing less; and Bird, listening, thought, "This is passion; this is the real thing; this surpasses in height and depth any emotion that I could possibly feel. Poor old chap, he has fairly caught the disease." He suffered grievously as he watched the suffering of Heber.

Then Heber came and put a tremulous hand on his shoulder.

"There you are. That's how it is with me." And he drew away and stood looking down at Bird. "But nothing on earth would make me go on with it—if it is to be as your rival. If your feelings are really engaged, I give up—I obliterate myself. At a word from you, I wipe myself out"; and his voice broke again, in the way that had already overwhelmed Bird. "I couldn't take happiness at the expense of a pal—and such a pal as you. And, listen to this, I'm not even sure that she cares for me," and he groaned again. "I've no valid reason for thinking that she cares for me—no, not the snuff of a candle. She may like you best—or she may be ready to, if you ask her. Birdie, if you want her, take her. You'll make her happier, I dare say. You're ten thousand times a better fellow than I am."

"Oh, what rubbish—what utter rot."

"It's not rubbish. It's the truth. Oh, don't suppose I can't appreciate what you are. It's only that I can't say it—not ever, Birdie, except in such an hour as this—when one's feelings are uncorked—when the cursed shyness or reticence that we Englishmen make a law of—when something smashes that down and we let out all that we've bottled so carefully for a lifetime." And he went on; saying impossible things, showing such esteem and love as Bird had never dreamed of.

Bird sat there, with the tobacco jar between his knees,

looking up at Heber and imploring him to stop. He was shattered, melted, emotionally drowned. The affection and the magnanimousness of Heber thus convincingly revealed to him, and both at the same time, were more than he could bear.

"My dear Willy. Ah—let us be calm. Let us get back to common sense"; and he clattered his pipe against the rim of the jar. "I've heard you out. Now hear me."

He paused, and stretched for the matchbox. He knew what he was going to say, but he was not sure how he could best say it. Without hesitation he had made up his mind to sacrifice himself. He did not know if indeed he had any faint remote chance with Evelyn. If he had, he must abandon it. Self-immolation must be the answer to his friend's magnanimity.

He said then that, on his honour, his feelings were not seriously engaged.

"I don't believe you," said Heber, walking again and waving his arms.

"Fact, old lad. I'm not saying I don't admire her—and like talking to her. Oh, yes. She's a very *taking* girl. I said that at once—first time I saw her. But—" Bird hid his plump face by stooping over the tobacco jar —"but, well, she is not to me—and never could be—what she is to you."

"Oh, Birdie, is that true?" cried Heber in a sort of wail.

"Honour bright and shining," said Bird resolutely. "Besides—if it wasn't"—and his voice wavered—"not a dog's chance—in that quarter. She'd never look at me."

"No, don't think that," said Heber, more torturingly magnanimous than ever. "She praises you—they all praise you."

"Just their politeness—kindness of heart."

"Not a bit. They like your company. You make them laugh."

"Just so," said Bird, sadly, and a little bitterly. "They laugh at me."

"No, not *at* you, *with* you. In many ways you are just the sort of man that——"

"Oh, no"; and Bird succeeded in making the sounds and appearance of a laugh. "Of us two, you're the lady-killer—always were—from the beginning."

"What am I to believe?" said Heber, once more stationed in front of his friend.

"Why, what I tell you," said Bird, looking up at him. "I just admire her—and no more. Certainly, as far as I am concerned, you have a clear field. Go in and win her—as you deserve to win everything, and always have done."

Then Heber believed. Heber was delighted, radiant.

"Dear old fellow," he said, "you give me life. Oh, what a brick you are!"

Bird got up, replaced the tobacco jar on the mantelpiece, and stood there with his back turned. "That's all right," he said chokingly. Then, after striking five or six matches, at last he had his pipe well alight, and puffed out a heavy cloud. "You—you run round to her, Willy. She—she'll be expecting you. Push ahead with it now. Hang this smoke. It's got into my eyes. Run along, Willy. Don't bother about me."

Heber, with hurried protestations of regard, dashed from the room; and Bird stood there alone, loudly blowing his nose and gently wiping his eyes. Those foolish, unrestrainable teardrops disgusted him; for he was contented really, feeling warm and comfortable in the first glow of his sacrifice.

As soon as he heard the hall door bang behind the departing suitor he went upstairs to his room.

But ten minutes later Heber had returned again. He came to Bird's room and explained.

"They'd all gone to bed. Not a gleam of light from any of the windows. Of course it's later than I thought. It's nearly midnight."

"By jove!" said Bird, "how the evening has flown. Well, you must get to work first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER V

THAT generous glow still sustained Bird next day. He packed early and was gone by the first train—naturally he could not stay in Lippleford. Nor could he trust himself to attempt any good-byes to those people at Mrs. Padwick's cottage; the fortunate Heber must convey his excuses. He slept—or rather did not sleep—one night in London, and on the morrow went down to Brighton.

And there, at the big hotel on the seafront, he began to suffer. As Heber had said in regard to his own distress, the thing was appalling.

He thought now persistently about marriage. The old thoughts regarding its risks, the loss of liberty that it entailed, the surrender of the delights afforded by male society, returned to him during these heavy meditations; but they had no force wherewith to oppose the longing for this other companionship, this marvellous bond between two people of different sexes. What had seemed to him almost impossible was now a vivid, clearly defined picture of elysium—"heaven on earth," as he murmured to himself tragically. He understood now that his failure in all previous conceptions of marriage had perhaps been caused by a habit of looking at it from its material, baser point of view. He had considered love either as a boiling, passionate affair or an instinct of nature seasonally demanding satisfaction, but never as this innocent, spiritual desire for the loved object.

All that was highest and purest in him, the very soul

of Bird, was craving for contact and union with the soul of Evelyn Glover. Even in his fantastic dreams, when all brain control had ceased, in the sort of amorous megalomania that nightly afflicted him, there was nothing gross or sensual. Evelyn came to him amidst a scene of surpassing grandeur, down marble steps or along palatial terraces. Their lips never met. She just slid her hand into his. At the touch of those fingers, peace, relief of mind and body, an immense beatitude, filled the sleeping Bird; and he soared away with her as lightly and buoyantly as an untethered balloon.

Whether he was asleep or awake, his thoughts concerning her were thus unsubstantial, free from sense-degradation; they dealt not with facts at all, excepting those in regard to marriage, the home, the blending of their destinies. He wanted to live in the same house with her, to hear those deep notes of her voice all day long, to see her pouring out tea at breakfast and receiving a slice of salmon from his hands at dinner, to watch her stately, gracious attitudes as she sat reading or sewing when the curtains were drawn and the lamps lighted. He wanted to have her there in his home, always with him, for ever, instead of seeking ridiculous pretext to catch a glimpse of her in company.

Yet, throughout this phase of deep-seated pain, Bird was outwardly quite unchanged. He felt wonder sometimes at his own fortitude in keeping up appearances and hiding all signs of inward woe. He had chosen the biggest hotel in Brighton, and he dwelt amidst crowds and turmoil; politely holding doors open for unknown ladies, playing billiards with unknown gentlemen, chatting with the barber who shaved him, hurrying out to the front steps to see the London coach arrive, sitting in the "palm lounge" and beating time to the band—doing, in short,

what everybody else was doing. When the lift was too full or when he gallantly stood aside to make room for females, he used to see himself in the huge mirrors on the gilded staircase—a solid, well-preserved, middle-aged man mounting the stairs to meet him on every landing; a man wearing a gray Homburg hat, wide knickerbockers, and woollen stockings of varied tint on his massively modelled calves; a person of naturally blonde complexion now somewhat reddened and sunburnt; a jolly sort of fellow without a care in the world.

And that was exactly what he seemed to guests at the big hotel. He was so obviously amiable and genial that they talked to him and made his acquaintance.

An old lady who spent her whole time in the hall, on a small sofa that faced the office where you left your bedroom key, used to smile and nod to him as if he had been quite a friend.

When she saw him with his hat and stick, making toward that hall door, she always said, "Are you going for a little walk?"

"Yes, I am," said Bird, beaming at her good-naturedly.

Then when she saw him come in again she nodded and smiled, and said, "Have you been for a little walk?"

"Yes, I have," said Bird, as if flattered by the inquiry.

And there was a younger lady, a Mrs. Denham, a widow from India, with two children. The elder child, a gawky girl of twelve, had a pigtail and stared. "Janet, don't stare." Bird often heard the mother reprove the girl for her bad habit. The younger child was a little boy of seven with a mop of flaxen hair. "Tony, come here," Mrs. Denham said continually.

The melting of all conventional ice between Bird and Mrs. Denham was due to the antics of this boy. From the first he seemed fascinated by Bird. Of an afternoon,

when people were taking their coffee and listening to the band among the palms of the lounge, he would come sidling toward Bird in a spellbound manner, pause at a few yards' distance, and giggle as if he longed, but did not dare, to draw nearer.

"Tony," said his mother, "come here. Do you hear me? Come here at once."

But soon the ridiculous child was back again at about the same distance, giggling, longing for Bird. And so it went on, until one afternoon he broke through the barrier of dread, and yielding to the spell, dashed right across at Bird.

"Well, young gentleman," said Bird genially, but in fact enervated by the intruder's persistence.

"Tony, come here," said the mother.

The child was worrying Bird, plunging at him in his chair, with head down, butting at his stomach, showing Bird nothing but the mop of yellow hair, wriggling horribly and kicking Bird on the shins.

"I say. I say. Gently."

Mrs. Denham came over and dragged the child away.

"I'm so sorry," she said apologetically, and with a pale, tired kind of smile; "but I am afraid my little boy has taken a fancy to you. Please don't let him bother you again."

Bird, who had of course risen to his feet, said, "Oh, that's all right"; and he repeated the assurance with the greatest possible politeness. "It's all right. Fond of children. It's quite all right."

He saw now, while they stood close together, that she was rather younger than he had supposed and considerably better looking. No one could call her handsome; but she had wavy bronze hair, an aquiline nose, and generally a well-bred and refined air. What spoilt her was

the washed-out earthy tint peculiar to people who have stayed too long under Indian suns, and also the fatigue or lassitude that showed in her eyes and voice as well as in her smile. Bird—"sizing her up," as he always described the process—classed her "distinctly good style, thirty-four years of age, with a past behind her."

"Quite all right," he murmured, bowing slightly but very courteously; and Mrs. Denham went back to her chair.

After this they exchanged these slight, coldly reserved, yet perfectly polite bows when they met about the hotel; and when the little boy Tony came bothering—as he did—Bird would look across at her and seem to say, without sounding the words, that it was quite all right, while she made the sketch of a deprecating gesture or sent her daughter to fetch the annoyance away. But there was no more conversation until the afternoon of the accident.

On that afternoon Bird was thinking deeply about a letter which had come to him from Wilfred Heber. He sat there with an unusually hot cup of coffee in his hands, and once approached his lips to the rim of the cup and blew discreetly, although automatically. His mind, all the real Bird, was many miles away; only this automatic Bird, acting for him, knew that the coffee was still too hot to drink.

Then, as a flash of lightning, his young admirer took him thus unawares. Tony plunged between his knees; the flaxen head butted and rose. There was a cry, a crash, and boy and man were both drenched in the steaming, almost scalding flood.

Even the polite Bird could not say that this was quite all right. The best he could get out of himself, after the universal commotion had abated, was the statement that a coffee cup always seems to hold a pailful when you

knock it over like that. Then he went upstairs to change his clothes.

After dinner the same night he felt compelled to talk to Mrs. Denham in order to prove that he was not sulky or nourishing resentment. He asked kindly about the boy, now safe in bed, trusting that Tony had taken no harm, and so on. They sat talking till it was late. She talked well. Indeed she was, it seemed, a better talker than listener. She told Bird a great deal about her life in India.

"I have been in the East myself," he said. "Yes, I was in Ceylon many years ago, and what struck me——"

"Yes?" she said, arching her thin dark eyebrows interrogatively, but continuing to talk without giving Bird time to cut in.

He let her run on, not attending to the tale really, saying, "Just so," "Upon my word," or "You surprise me," from time to time. Nearly all the evening he thought of Evelyn Glover. While he said "Just so" to Mrs. Denham, he said to himself, "Here is an elegant, graceful woman of the world, not more than thirty-four at the outside, and I suppose I should have thought her pleasing, distinctly pleasing, if I had met her before I saw Evelyn."

These little occurrences all belonged to the first week of the visit to Brighton, and he passed now into another phase of his martyrdom. Wilfred Heber wrote, raving ecstatically, to report that he had been accepted by Evelyn. Next day and the day after he wrote again with further rhapsodies. The frequent and detailed reports of his friend's bliss were altogether too much for Bird. There were days on which he refrained from going to the hotel office to ask for his letters, simply because he did not feel strong enough to face another one from Willy; and when a page boy came to him with a salver of docu-

ments, saying, "Your letters, please, sir," he said they were to be taken back to the office and kept there till he asked for them.

But sooner or later he had to read what Willy told him, and so learned that the engaged couple were now in London doing a round of theatres and inspecting houses or flats. "I could not bury so bright a creature in such a backwater of life as Lippleford," said Heber, mixing his metaphors rather badly for a literary gentleman; "and it delights me to think that there will be no question therefore of our disturbing you at the cottage." And he added that Birdie must accept every stick of the old-fashioned furniture as a free gift, since none of it would be good enough or smart enough for the enchanted bower that he was going to furnish for Eve. "It may not be very large, our *gite*," wrote Wilfred gaily and airily, "but one thing you may be sure of, it will at least contain a spare room for a certain honoured guest—*your* room, Birdie, and we shall never be so well pleased, both of us, as when you are occupying it."

"Not much," said Bird to himself, with a burning, aching sadness that was more dreadful than anything he had hitherto endured. "There *are* limits."

And sharper than the pang of toothache came the throbs of mental anguish when Heber said how greatly Evelyn esteemed and liked him. "In all things," wrote Heber, "she is divinely sympathetic, but her intuitive comprehension of what you and I have been to each other is as amazing as it is beautiful. Till now I did not guess that any woman, however richly dowered with intelligence, could so completely analyze the meaning and strength of friendship as men understand the word. It is the crown of my rejoicing to feel that *our* friendship is safe, and that it will be *us three* linked together instead of *us two*.

In this my new-found happiness you will take your share."

"My share," thought Bird. "No, Wilfred, I have stood aside once and for ever. Our acquaintance is gone in the wreck of everything else. If you fancy I shall be willing to hang round and watch you and her—well, you're off the target, old boy"; and he could have almost wept from the pain of it. "After long years, perhaps, I will blow in upon you both and eat a potato with you. Yes, after long years"; and he clung to these words, finding some faint comfort in the dignified poetic turn of them. "After long years."

Then he had an access of fiery indignation. Life was too cruel, fate was too abominably merciless. What had he ever done that he should be made so to suffer? Memory of Evelyn's seeming encouragement to him, Bird, and not to Heber at all, stung and inflamed his mind. He remembered that she had looked at him, again and again, with mysterious secret invitation in her eyes; how they had chatted together so jollily; how they had laughed and joked. Perhaps he would have suited her better than Heber—Heber, the grab-all; Heber whose motto had ever been "Me first, and devil take the hindmost"; Heber with his mock affection when he wanted anything and his supercilious, sneering coldness as soon as he had got it; Heber, moody, glum, uncertain of temper, always willing to snarl, yes, and bite, too—bite the kindly hand held out by love or pity.

In imagination the miserable Bird saw Heber glutting himself with all the domestic rapture that his too chivalrous friend had renounced. He saw Evelyn pouring out the tea at breakfast for Heber, sitting on a low stool at his feet and reading aloud to him after dinner, waiting on him, ministering to him—now his slave, now his plaything; used, enjoyed, and perhaps finally betrayed, as men and

women, one and all, were betrayed by Heber if you gave him time enough to do it.

"But I say, hang it," Bird thought after a little while. "This won't do."

This was jealousy—as, like an honest fellow, he recognized and admitted. It was jealousy, and, alas, none the easier to bear because you gave it its correct name. It gnawed, it devoured him day after day, although he fought against the unworthy passion with all his strength.

"Have you been for a little walk?" asked that old lady in the hall, smiling.

"No, I've been for a long one," said Bird curtly.

He was red and hot, dusty and tired, in no condition to obtrude himself upon the society of females in the crowded lift; and as he climbed the stairs, the great mirrors showed him a stout, panting, perspiring traveller with wild blue eyes and dank fair hair that had stuck to his hat-stained forehead. He had been walking, walking—trying to walk down his bitter envious regrets, and failing. He walked all day long sometimes, over the hills, along the valleys, anywhere. He exhausted himself with this irrationally violent exercise, and sank into an apathetic state during which he had no power, no desire to think of the past, present, or future. He would sit for hours in the palm lounge. While the apathy lasted he allowed Master Denham to butt and kick him; and Mrs. Denham to talk to him, even to stroll with him along the King's Road, and take him to a play at the theatre on the end of the pier. He behaved like a man doing things in his sleep.

He and Mrs. Denham were having tea together in the ladies' drawing room, without the children, when the page came round bearing his salver full of letters that had arrived by the afternoon post.

"One for you, sir."

Bird looked at the peace-destructive handwriting, and held the letter between finger and thumb.

"Pray open it," said Mrs. Denham, with that tired or languid smile of hers. "Of *course*. How *can* you be so ceremonious?"

"It's quite all right," said Bird absent-mindedly. "Not the least hurry. Nothing important."

"You don't know that till you've read it," said Mrs. Denham with another weary smile; and in an elegant, well-bred manner she picked up an illustrated newspaper, absorbing herself with it so that Bird should feel free and at his ease.

He opened the letter then, read the first two or three lines, and uttered a loud exclamation.

"Oh, what is it?" said Mrs. Denham, startled out of her graceful abstraction and dropping the paper. "I hope—not bad news."

"Yes, it is," said Bird loudly. "Awful news—about a friend of mine. I—I am crushed by it." He had sprung up from the amber satin couch, and he hurried through the hall and out to the front steps. He wanted to be by himself—alone with this terrific piece of news and his own sensations.

Heber wrote: "All is over. She has chucked me. These last days have felt blow about to fall. Fell yesterday evening. Shall join you to-morrow. Train Victoria 5.30. Reserve room"; and then the writing tailed off into a mere wavy indication of what Heber was wishing to say. Bird could just make out one sentence—"Now help me if you can"—a word like "drug," another like "aquarium" which Bird felt sure was "oblivion"; and one more looking exactly like "seaside," but, as Bird feared, intended for "suicide."

Bird repeated the opening words in an articulated but

soundless whisper. "All is over. She has chucked me." And his heart leaped for joy. It was such a relief as he had never known. It was a dead weight lifted. He stood on the hotel steps, hatless, filling his lungs with the delicious restorative air that blew toward him from the dancing sea. The horn on the London coach blew a fanfare of joy; people came pouring out of the hotel; and Bird drew aside and vainly struggled with his selfish feelings, with this immense gladness, this ecstasy as of a condemned man who has just read his reprieve and knows that after all he is to live and not to die.

It was not any hope that he might now get the girl himself; it was the supreme satisfaction derived from the certainty that Heber was not going to get her. It was the contentment, the appeasement of his whole organism, caused by the riddance of that grinding, lacerating pain of jealousy.

Yet he was sorry for Heber, yearningly sorry for him. All the old regard came surging back now that the cause of estrangement had gone. Help him! Of course he would. Anything on earth for him.

Then glancing at the letter again he realized tardily—as always happens on such occasions—that the to-morrow of the letter was in truth to-day.

"Why, bless my soul," thought Bird, "if the old chap left Victoria at five-thirty he is nearly here, and I've only just time to meet him at the station."

CHAPTER VI

HEBER seemed literally a broken man. He looked twenty years older, he stooped, he walked with vacillating, feeble footsteps, pausing without reason and then hurrying on aimlessly; all muscular power seemed to have waned and his sight to have grown dim. He bumped into people on the seafront as if he had not seen them, and shambled forward without apologizing, as if unconscious of the bodily shock.

On these bright autumn mornings Bird used to take him along toward Hove and beyond it, patiently comforting him all the way.

"Yes, keep me out in the air. Give me all the breathing space you can."

He told Bird that he was done for. He had taken such a knock that he would never get over it.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Bird expostulated comfortingly.

"Why not? Do you suppose you know better than I do?"

"No. Only what I mean is, Willy—well, you know, time——"

But the suggestion that time was likely to do him any good made Heber angry.

"What I really meant," said Bird apologetically, "what I'm trying to put to you, is this. There can be no question that with strong self-contained natures like yours—well, then——"

"Go on," said Heber gently. He seemed to like this much better. "Go on. I believe you are right in what you're going to say."

But poor Bird did not really know what he was going to say. He cleared his throat, and then continued flounderingly.

"Yes, that's how it strikes me, Willy. Anybody with your force of character—your capacity for deep feeling, and imagination, and all that——"

"Yes, yes," said Heber eagerly. "I think you are hitting the right nail on the head now"; and he linked his arm in Bird's.

"Then I say, Willy, that having thrown all that into the balance, having staked it, as it were, on one girl—then, if she treats you badly——"

"How dare you say that?" Heber had snatched his arm away; his eyes were blazing, he shook in wrath. "D'you understand? Not one word against *her*. I won't allow it—not from any man alive."

Frankly, Heber in his desolation was insufferable. Yet Bird bore with him. Bird felt so poignantly sorry for him that no fatigues, no outrages, could exhaust his patience. The instability of mood proved the most trying part of Bird's ordeal. You could not rely on Heber's mental states even from minute to minute. In an hour he had a hundred rapid changes. It was not remarkable, therefore, that one always seemed to say and to do the wrong thing.

He had these sudden ungovernable fits of anger, and while one was bracing oneself to withstand them he lapsed disconcertingly into this other extreme of gentleness—a gentleness so much imbued with sentimentality as to be sometimes quite maudlin.

Thus, on the first or second morning, he stood looking

at one of those automatic machines just inside the gates of the pier.

"Want to try your weight?" asked Bird cheerily.

Heber merely shook his head and continued to look at the machine.

"Are you thinking it's out of order, Willy? They often are."

"No," said Heber very gently and softly after a silence, with an expression of face that was as yearningly wistful as the tone of his voice. "I was thinking of Evelyn. Exactly a week ago, Birdie, she and I were together—at Earl's Court station—and we stood laughing before one of these things. She and I—yes, ah me!" He sighed. "I said I wanted to weigh her. I asked it as a favour. . . Can you guess the result?"

"Well, I'll say ten stone seven—simply as a guess."

"No, no." Heber with extraordinary gentleness pardoned this gross blunder on the part of Bird. "No, I didn't mean that—not to guess her weight. I don't know it myself. To this day I don't know what she weighs. . . . Laughingly, she said she would grant my request on one condition—that I would be weighed *with* her. We got on the machine together. I had to hold her in my arms—it wobbled so. And we laughed, Birdie—both of us—in gaiety and lightheartedness. She clung to me, laughingly, while the needle danced. We remained long after the penny had fallen. Till the inspector came." As Heber said this his voice began to fade into a nearly inaudible murmur. "Rude. And I lost my temper with him. That was wrong of me. He was only doing his duty." Bird, listening acutely, wrung with pity by the abject maudlin state to which his friend was now reducing himself, just caught the last faint words. "If I ever meet that man again I'll ask his pardon—humbly."

"Oh, I shouldn't bother to do that," said Bird.

Heber tilted his hat to the back of his head, passed his hand across his forehead as though awaking from a trance; and then, turning and moving abruptly, bumped into Mrs. Denham and her boy and girl.

Bird made what seemed to be a necessary introduction.

Then, after the exchange of a few politenesses, when the two men strolled on again alone, Heber had an access of white and trembling fury. He accused Bird of being utterly heartless. He said he would never forgive Bird for introducing him to a total stranger at such a time.

Again, after luncheon, he was furious because Mrs. Denham had spoken to him in the reading room, whither he had repaired seeking solitude.

"You see what you have brought upon me," he said ragingly. "You have delivered me into the hands of that woman. Keep her away from me, I say. I won't submit to her prying and questioning."

"Surely she didn't question you?"

"No, but she will, if I give her a chance. I could see it in her hungry, inquisitive, hateful face. Keep that woman away from me."

Uselessly Bird defended this inoffensive hotel friend, saying that, although the little boy might be an odious nuisance, the mother was well-bred, well-intentioned, rather a charming person than otherwise. He saw that Heber was possessed by an unreasoning horror of her.

Yet, at tea-time, if you please, Heber bought a large box of chocolates, presented it to the boy Tony, and listened to Mrs. Denham's lavish thanks with an almost sickly meekness.

"I wonder why on earth you did that," said Bird, amazed, and in spite of his affectionate solicitude a little disgusted. "I told you the boy is a nuisance."

"He touched my heart," said Heber. "He set me thinking, as I watched him hopping up and down. I thought of his youth and innocence—and that one day he will be a grown man and a woman may break his heart."

"Oh, I see," said Bird wearily.

The presence of Mrs. Denham added to Bird's difficulties. Bird and she having been on comparatively easy terms, no doubt she could not understand why the arrival of his friend should relegate her to the dimmest background of formal civility; moreover, as Bird surmised, Heber's ill-advised chocolates led her to suppose that the newcomer, if a little shy, was by nature expansive; thus on more than one occasion she tacitly offered him her society, but always in a reserved, well-bred manner. Her attitude was that of approachableness and no more.

To Bird she spoke in praise of Heber, saying that he was distinguished looking, evidently very intelligent, too; and that he reminded her somewhat of a man of much the same height and build that she had known in India. But her Indian friend did not stoop. She thought it a pity that Mr. Heber failed to carry himself more erectly. It was merely a habit and he ought to eradicate it.

Bird, at his wits' ends and hoping to mollify Heber and make him think better of the lady, reported her complimentary words.

"I wish you wouldn't dodge away from her so very openly," he pleaded. "She must twig it sooner or later, and then she'll be wounded. And I know you don't want to wound any one's feelings."

"No, no," said Heber mournfully. "Heaven knows I don't."

"Exactly. Then I wish you could bring yourself to do the polite to her. Before you came, she and I——"

But Heber raged again. In a hissing whisper he

warned Bird to beware of Mrs. Denham himself. He said she was a dangerous type. Dozens of such women came from India by every mail boat; penniless adventuresses, cadgers in petticoats, harpies with powdered noses and painted lips. Hot as it is, they make India hotter still; too hot to hold them at last, and then, after poisoning their husband or the man they have called their husband, they do a bolt for it, get back to England under an assumed name, and come down to Brighton and catch the first fool they see, get him into their clutches, and squeeze him dry before they let him go.

Bird was indignant at this monstrous, absurd tirade.

"Oh, rot," he said warmly. "I know what's what—just as well as you. She's a very decent sort, Mrs. Denham is. And as to being penniless—— Why, you're right off the line there. Very well-to-do, from all appearances. No one can stay in this hotel for nothing, can they? Well, she has rooms on the first floor—herself, the children, and her maid. Yes, she has a maid with her. Very respectable person, the maid is. Not much of the adventuress about that! What? Nor cadging either. Look here, the evening we went to the theatre, she insisted on paying for her own seat. *Insisted!* Of course I offered—I intended to pay for both; but she wouldn't allow it."

"Oh, what do I care?" And with a moan Heber collapsed. "Have it your own way," he whispered. "Why do you shove her down my throat, in season and out? Birdie, is it fair?"

"My dear old chap, I didn't mean to upset you."

"Then leave off pestering me with your Mrs. Denham."

All this was in Bird's bedroom late at night. Those last hours of Bird's daily task were dreadful. Worn out, sleep-bemused, asking for his bed, he had to listen every night to an interminable soliloquy about Evelyn Glover

and the tangled skein of events that led to the rupture. With pauses, silences, tryings-back, and fresh starts, Heber maundered on and on, while Bird undressed and fed him with sympathetic yawning interjections.

It has been mentioned that Heber whispered, the reason being that next door there was a double-bedded room occupied by an aunt and niece, and on a certain night, when Heber had shouted a good deal, one or other of these ladies piteously beat upon the wall as though imploring peace. Since then Heber gave his monologue in a whisper, dropping his voice altogether at the very emotional passages, so that Bird was obliged to strain his ears painfully.

"We disagreed on many subjects," murmured Heber droningly, as he lounged on Bird's bed. "But till the blow fell I never thought for an instant that she minded. She never seemed to mind. I used to feel, afterward, that we were better friends than ever."

"There's a proverb, isn't there?" said Bird, as he threw his braces over the back of a chair. "Falling out of lovers, what?"

"Don't think I was obstinate or opinionative with her in those little arguments. Oh, no. In fact, I told her—explicitly—that her word was law. In everything—not only about furnishing the flat, and the Japanese, oriental stuff—which I abhor—personally. Oh, if she could please herself, she would please me. I said so—not once, but again and again. That was my great wish—to give her the things she wanted and had not had till now. Birdie, in my tremendous love I was not selfish."

"Of course not," said Bird, picking up a tooth brush.

"I knew—oh, too well—the disabilities I suffered under. My age, my lack of humour—when compared with that bright, gay young life. But then I thought—dear child,

she is alone in the world—poor—oh, desperately poor, Birdie—my heart bled. But, as I say, I thought I had *that* at least to offer her. And I thought, yes, I own I thought that she herself felt the value of these mere worldly advantages."

"You bet she did," said Bird, cleaning his teeth.

"What's that?" said Heber sharply; and he sat up, glaring. "Not one word against her."

"No, no. I only meant that her friend—Mrs. Fawcett and all that crew—would point out that you were a good match."

"You're hinting that she is mercenary—or that I was trying to *buy* her. Oh, Bird." Heber subsided on the bed. "As if I didn't know my real unworthiness. . . . But then why did she lead me to forget it? I *had* forgotten—when the blow fell."

So it continued, night after night.

Bird's head ached from the stress of it. Then one night, when he had had about a fortnight of it, he offered to go up to London, see Miss Glover, and ask if there was no possibility of her changing her mind.

In the manner that drowning men are supposed to clutch at straws, Heber seized upon this amazing suggestion.

"Tell her I can't live without her—that's what it amounts to," he cried. "Tell her my last shred of pride is gone—I throw myself on her mercy—I lay myself at her feet, grovelling. Plead with her. Argue with her."

"I'll do my best," said Bird loyally and staunchly.

CHAPTER VII

SHE was lodging in a horrid little street near the Earl's Court Exhibition; and when, at about three o'clock next day, Bird stood upon her doorstep the Great Wheel seemed to be suspending its swung cars immediately above his head.

The slatternly woman who opened the door was the landlady, and not a servant.

"She's expecting you," said the landlady. "You telegraphed, didn't you?"

"Yes, I telegraphed."

"Well," said the landlady, in a friendly, confidential manner, "she's run out for a few minutes, but she'll be back directly. If you'll please step up and wait——"

It was one of those ill-planned houses in which when you shut the front door you plunge the hall and staircase into darkness. The landlady brought about this eclipse and then led Bird stumbling up to the first floor, where she restored him to daylight in a small sitting room at the back.

"I don't suppose she'll be long," said the landlady. "I'm afraid I can't offer you a newspaper."

Bird waited then. He waited to carry through this second sacrifice, to consummate the final stage of his self-immolation. He was going to urge Evelyn to give herself to Wilfred. He intended to make the most strenuous efforts on behalf of his unfortunate friend. He was going to do all this. Yet, although he looked forward to

the approaching interview with perturbation, he felt no personal pain. Why? How could that be possible?

Because it was no sacrifice truly. That first time, when, bravely standing aside, he had told Wilfred to conquer, the sacrifice had been very real. But he knew now, if he hadn't subconsciously know it before, that he was cured.

The poison had left his blood in the moment of reading that letter wherein Heber told of the rebuff he had sustained. There had been deep-seated invincible satisfaction in this shattering of the legend of Heber's power over women, in the completeness of Heber's failure, in the discovery that Heber, defeated, had no more pride or strength than anybody else; and the cure had been progressing steadily ever since. Certainly weariness had entered also into the curative process. No one could have survived Heber's fortnight-long maunderings and been afterward unchanged.

Yes, Bird must have known now that he was a cured man, if only by the indignation he felt against the person who had brought them both so low.

He intended, if Miss Glover refused to undo the still existent mischief in Heber's case, to give her a "piece of his mind." He considered it probable that he would talk to Miss Evelyn Glover as she had never been talked to before.

She kept him waiting a long while.

The window of the room was closed; and, although there was no fire in the grate, the afternoon sun shining through the glass made the little place warm—not to say airless and stuffy. Bird wondered if he might venture to open the windows; he sat wiping his forehead and feeling uncomfortable. There was rather a nasty smell of varnish, too. Rising from his chair and investigating, he

traced this unpleasant odour to certain newly painted squares and oblongs of wood that lay here and there—on top of the piano, on its keyboard, on a small writing table, and on the sofa. There were more of these leaning against the wall. Standing with his head a little on one side to examine some of them, he decided that they were unquestionably artistic work performed by Evelyn herself. They were portions of unfinished furniture—chair backs, table-flaps, and so on—that Evelyn had decorated with these painted flowers for payment to be received from the furniture-maker. She was poor—she worked thus for a livelihood, or to add to her sadly insufficient means. This thought made Bird still more uncomfortable.

Poverty is a horrible thing—for a girl.

As well as being badly planned, the house was badly built, and of the most flimsy materials, so that every sound in it could be heard by all within its walls. Bird of a sudden became aware of a scrooping latch-key at work in the front door. The door shook the whole building as it closed; and next moment the bell notes of Evelyn's voice went through and through him.

She was down below in the hall, giving directions to her landlady about tea. She said she had bought these buns and she supposed there was some jam left; she asked if a few slices of toast could be prepared; she wanted it to be a good tea. Bird heard every word, and listened with rapidly increasing mental trouble.

"Only for the two of you?" asked the landlady.

"Yes, only us two," said Evelyn. "And not till five o'clock."

Bird was hideously embarrassed. It was now three o'clock—and tea at five! Did she suppose he was going to stop here all that time? Absurd. Yet, although feeling so worried, he was strangely touched by her making

all these preparations for his comfort. Coming immediately after those thoughts about poverty, the little episode had a rather poignant appeal in it; it contained sweetness and regret as well as mere botheringness. She had gone out to buy him buns—thinking perhaps that he had a fifty-mile journey behind him and a fifty-mile journey in front of him, she had planned a substantial feast for him. But he could not let the thing go on. Feeling compelled to intervene, he opened the sitting-room door and came out on the landing.

"Miss Glover, forgive me, but please don't trouble about tea."

Miss Glover was only a shape in the obscurity down below, but the landlady at the bottom of the stairs looking up at him showed a little more distinctly.

"No tea?" echoed the landlady. "Which is it to be, miss?"

"Do as I've told you," said Evelyn, quietly and resolutely. "At five o'clock."

But Bird interposed again. "No, please not. It's too kind of you—but I really can't stay so long. I shall have said all I have to say in an hour at the outside."

From the darkness came deep-toned explanation, and a shy laugh.

"Of course I wish you could stop, but I was afraid you wouldn't. The fact is, I was ordering tea for myself and Daphne Yates. She's coming round to see me about half-past four."

"Oh, I *beg* your pardon," said Bird; and he retreated to the sitting room as Evelyn came up the stairs. She passed the open door and mounted to some higher floor, in order to take off her hat.

Bird stood waiting for her again. He felt that he had

made a bad start, and his embarrassment remained with him.

It was swept away by the shock of her entrance. The effect that she produced upon him was so shattering that there was no mental area available for such a minor emotion as bashfulness; and in the midst of his great amazement he merely noted that she herself seemed shy.

Could this really be Evelyn Glover, the lady of his dreams? She was the same size. But except for this she had absolutely nothing in common with the girl he remembered. This one was just an ordinary young woman in a white blouse and blue serge skirt and leather belt, with dark, untidy hair and dark eyebrows—the sort of person he had seen by hundreds all his life, in omnibuses, in trains, everywhere. Not even attractive—rather the reverse. Not to be looked at again, not to be thought of for a moment. Just a girl. The kind of appearance that you cannot describe. If asked, you would have to say, "Well, I've told you. She's a girl of twenty-three or twenty-five. What more do you want to know?"

They shook hands ceremoniously, stiffly even, and she began to move the varnished panels from the seat of the sofa. While she did so Bird praised them.

"I had no idea you were an artist."

"Well, I'm not," she said, "but I do this sort of thing to fill in odd hours and earn an honest penny. I'm afraid they're rotten, really—amateurish—not up to pavement-artist style"; and she laughed shyly.

"Indeed no," said Bird. "Honestly, I think they're splendid. I've been admiring them immensely."

She seemed pleased by his approbation of her painting; and, struggling to pull himself together and readjust his ideas after the shock of that enormous surprise, he continued to praise it.

"Really beautiful. Nothing so charming as flowers when well painted. Those are heartseases, aren't they?"

"Violas. It's the same thing."

"And this is a rhododendron!"

"No, a peony."

"A peony—of course. How cleverly you have done the —er—foliage, too. . . . And here we have daisies—marguerites, aren't they? Or are they may-blossom?"

"My dear man, it isn't a guessing competition," said Evelyn, in the whimsical, chaffing tone that once had such power over him. "Do sit down."

She sat down herself; and Bird, accepting her invitation, sat down also, just opposite her. He laid his hands on his knees, assumed a more solemn air, and was about to get to work, when she jumped up abruptly.

"Would you mind," she asked, "if I opened the window a little way?"

"No, please do."

"Sure you're not afraid of a draught?"

"No, I shall love it. It is just what I would have asked had I dared—as a personal favour, I mean. . . . Oh, but, please allow me."

She had gone to the window and was wrestling with a badly made sash that stuck fast in the frame. It would not budge. They wrestled with it together now, side by side.

"If we pull at the same moment," she said, "and not too hard, please, or the beastly thing will come down with a run, and smash."

Her shoulder touched his, the sensation of her breathing and pulling and straining seemed to be right inside him; the firmness of her whole body was strongly perceptible to him, as well as a sort of warm coolness about her, and also her fretful, almost childish displeasure be-

cause the window continued to defy their joint efforts. But the spell was completely broken; the charm had gone for ever. This propinquity, this contact, this intimate union of purpose and aim, that would have intoxicated him with delight a few short weeks ago now could not stir his pulses or send the slightest thrilling message to his brain. He observed the parting of her hair, a white, uncertainly defined streak, rather wide in one place, close to his chin; and he raised his chin lest the dark waving mass should touch it—that glory of dark hair to touch which with reverent hand, much less chin, he would have given ten years of his life.

"Well, I'm hanged," he murmured. "It *has* stuck, hasn't it?"

All this was a matter of moments, or fractions of moments. But while it lasted, beyond the mere bodily or organic sensations, Bird had an odd consciousness of really being sad, of suffering from loss. This part of it was very vague. It seemed to him that something beautiful and priceless, not perhaps his own personal possession but belonging to the whole of mankind, had gone out of the world. It was a feeling of the irretrievable, the irreparable, the sort of deep, instinctive feeling that one has in dreams.

Something else that was dreamlike, but of lesser volume and weight, was the notion that not for the first time were he and Evelyn pulling at a window together. It was not a new experience, but an old one. He had certainly done it before. Or else, by some untraceable association of ideas, he was linking it with a memory of some legend he had read in his extreme youth—some tale of a chivalrous knight and a maiden, some poetic piece of fiction that had found a swift response in his imaginative faculties when his mind was young and easily impressed.

"The beastly thing always does stick," said Evelyn. "It simply won't work."

Those words gave him the clue. It was not a legend or poem. It was the mowing machine—it was the beginning of all things; that afternoon when he had gallantly cut his fingers in struggling to put matters right for her. The vivid recollection of reality exploded the haze of dreams; it flooded his mind with sunlight. He *saw* the garden at Mrs. Padwick's cottage; he saw the five females, Evelyn in their midst, a largish, darkish, jolly sort of girl; he could smell the shorn grass, the sun-warmed earth in the herbaceous border; he could hear the bees buzzing among the hollyhocks; he and Heber were standing at the gate.

And in the hundredth part of a second he had a clearly reasoned, perfectly logical thought. He and Heber for a long while then had been cut off from all female society; for months they had been stuck down in Lippleford with only Mrs. Dunn to look at, never seeing a girl of any sort except the apple-cheeked daughters of the village, such as their own little maid who waited upon them at table. That was why those girls at Mrs. Padwick's, nicely dressed, with pretty stockings and slender ankles, had wrought such an overwhelming effect upon them. That was why they had made such asses of themselves.

"I beg your pardon."

The window came down with a run, and he almost fell upon Miss Glover. They resumed their seats. The fresh air did him good.

"Well now, Miss Glover——" and he paused. He had again put his hands on his knees, and he bent forward in his chair.

He could do her justice now, after that flash of logical reasoning. Her attitude on the sofa, one arm stretched

along the back and the other hand playing at her belt buckle, was not without a certain gracefulness. Her mouth, although too large, shut nicely and evenly. She *was* pretty—in a commonplace style. Almost one could admit that adjective of his, a *taking* girl—taking, that is to say, if you threw away all your higher standards and contented yourself with the best among the obviously second-class. She must not be compared with cultivated women of the world—such as Mrs. Denham, for instance—where practised manner, intelligence, refinements, aid and enhance the charms of appearance.

At that moment, all things thus considered, it seemed to him insanity on Heber's part to wish to go on with it. He felt in danger of pleading lamely and ineffectively.

"Well now, Miss Glover——" He repeated the words and paused once more.

The portentousness of his tone made her change her attitude. Her face had a childlike expression—as of a child that knows it is going to be scolded.

"Mr. Bird," she said, frowningly yet timidly, "if you intend to talk about Wilfred, please don't."

"But why not? Of course I must talk about him. That's what I've come for."

"It's not the least use."

"Oh, but really—Miss Glover, your treatment of my friend——"

"I am sorry, of course."

"Sorry! I am glad to hear it. But that is not enough. Oh, no. You cannot chuck people over without reasons or explanations."

"Of course I had reasons. We'd made a mistake—both of us."

"No, no," said Bird sternly. He felt that they were in the thick of it now. That childish expression of Eve-

lyn's face had changed to one of mature obstinacy—almost mulish obstinacy, it seemed. It nettled him. "No mistake at all. You took time to consider his proposal. You accepted him after weighing the pros and cons. You decided——"

"And I decided wrong. I've told you I'm sorry."

"You had no right to do it."

"Don't be hard on me."

She had changed her attitude again. She put both her hands on the back of the sofa and she leaned her forehead against them. In this position she had the pose of a stage heroine beaten down, physically as well as spiritually crushed, by the eloquence with which she was assailed; and Bird, who stood up to go on with it, felt that he was towering over her in a somewhat theatrical manner.

"When you win a man's heart you have no right to break it recklessly, wantonly." The force of the last word frightened him, although Evelyn had not stirred. "I mean by that—carelessly—without sufficient thought of the lifelong pain you are inflicting on a sensitive nature. You had no right to lead him on. You did lead him on, you know. And you had no right to do it." Bird continued in this strain for several minutes, and although after pumping up his indignation it had now become entirely sincere, he was self-conscious throughout the tirade. He felt surprised by this flow of strictly appropriate words, he did not know till now that he had it in him to talk like this; it far surpassed any anticipatory sketches of the speech that he had described to himself as "giving her a piece of his mind." He was really *letting her have it*. "Coquetry—up to a certain extent—I dare say is natural. Doubtless you have had numbers of admirers. He wasn't the first of course. When a man

is not in earnest, I say nothing against leading him on—flirtation and so forth. We all know what that means. But when you see that a man like Wilfred is in deadly earnest—and you cannot tell me a girl does not detect at once—then I say you had no right to take it as far as you did—practically to within sight of the wedding day—and then throw everything to the winds by intimating without warning that you have changed your mind."

Thus he went on. He could not stop himself. It seemed that wonderful new powers were coming to him; it was as if he had torn down all the impeding barriers of diffidence, respect, or fear that all his life had prevented him from getting to close grips with members of the other sex. He felt as if with every added word he was vindicating the truth of some profound elemental law—a remorseless law of instinctive antagonisms. To understand each other men and women *must* fight. Love and all the rest of it are but the smoke and noise that belong to the battlefield, but are not the battle itself. A man must either conquer a woman or give in to her. Between them compromise is out of the question. He thought, "I am simply bullying her. I shall have her crying, if I don't ease off a bit." But still he went on. Once he thought with a sudden weakening and remorse, "This is too heavy-handed. After all, she's a frail, feeble creature in comparison with myself." But then, looking down at her almost recumbent form, he noticed the firmness, the solidity of her shoulders and back. She was a big girl. She could take as much as he could give her. And with this thought he had a sudden intuition that she did not really mind; that all his indignant harangue was feeding her vanity; that she triumphed in the destruction of Heber, and that he, Bird, was helping her to taste and enjoy her triumph. This idea made him very angry.

He stormed at her. "It was cruel. It was horrible. I wouldn't have believed it of you. You had no right to back out of your bargain——"

"But you say I have no right to do anything"; and Evelyn uttered the words in a piteous, afflicted tone, raising her head at the same time to look at him, and then half smiling. "You *are* severe."

Bird sat down, stretched out his hand as if seeking one of hers. She immediately gave him one. He squeezed it gently, holding it for a moment and then letting it go.

That was the most amazing thing that happened throughout the interview. It was totally unexpected by him. Why on earth had he done it? He had sat down because those three words, "You are severe," had unaccountably extinguished the fire of his anger and made him regret that he had been so violent. The rest was instinctive, automatic, beyond his control.

"Look here, Evelyn," he said hesitatingly, feeling that he must at once obliterate the error and recover a position of dignified hostility. "What I mean, Evelyn, is this——" Then he flushed and looked at her helplessly. He had made another slip. "I should say, Miss Glover. Please forgive me. I used your Christian name quite inadvertently. Of course Willy called you Evelyn, and in speaking of you——"

"No, but I'd like you to call me Evelyn. I hate the other way."

"I think—in the circumstances——"

She was sitting up on the sofa now, with both arms extended, one on each side, along the back of it; she made a quick movement of her head to shake away all that dark, untidy hair from her eyes, and her lips slowly opened in a large frank smile. She seemed to him to have undergone another change. There was a candour, a friendli-

ness, a sort of *pallishness* about her that engaged his fancy. The old adjective "taking" occurred to him again.

"Mr. Bird, there's not the slightest reason that you shouldn't call me Evelyn—or Eve, if you want to shorten it."

"I shouldn't dream of doing so."

"Why not, Mr. Bird? I should keep in my place—I shouldn't take liberties. If you suppose that I should begin to call you—Birdie," and she laughed, outright, merrily, freely.

"No, no, really——" Bird was quite red in the face. He did not like it. He sat frowning, pulling at his blonde moustache; but then the red colour subsided, his whole good-humoured face relaxed, and he, too, laughed. "Evelyn, this won't do. It's all very well, but you mustn't chaff about it. I won't have my leg pulled. You must be serious."

"Yes, and you must be fair. You mustn't make unfounded accusations."

"If you have any defense to offer for your conduct, I should be prepared to listen to it," said Bird, smiling at her. "But in my opinion you are just a naughty, wilful girl."

"And ought to be smacked?"

"Yes, hard"; and he laughed heartily. He was now Bird at a picnic, gay and debonair, ready for an hour or two's badinage with anybody, quite at the top of his game in regard to repartee. "People like you oughtn't to be left at large. They ought to be shut up under lock and key. Or if they are allowed out once a week they should be labelled 'Dangerous'—yes, hang a placard round their necks——"

Evelyn was laughing delightedly. But Bird suddenly

pulled himself together. He coughed, look grave. He remembered his mission. He struggled to assume again the lost status of an accredited ambassador.

"Evelyn, I mean it—no more nonsense. Seriously, I do want you to consider poor old Wilfred's claim on you." She was going to speak, but he held up his hand warningly. "I am quite aware that my coming to plead his cause may appear a little strange to you. What business is it of mine? You may have thought that it was—well—an impertinence."

"No," she said earnestly, "I think it's very nice of you."

"Thank you."

"But you *are* nice. Oh, we all knew that."

"You are very kind, but I would rather. . . . Miss Glover—Evelyn—why I feel so strongly about it is that I know Wilfred so well. No one knows him as well as I do. He is the most sensitive man alive." At this she moved impatiently. "No, do please listen. I want to put it before you and enable you to realize it . . . His sensitiveness. Yes, that's the point. With any one else it might have been different."

"Might it?" said Evelyn, looking at him.

"Yes," said Bird seriously. "I make allowances, but what I can't forgive you for is playing the fool with Willy. . . . Suppose, for argument's sake, you had done it to me——"

"You didn't give me a chance of that," said Evelyn, with a mischievous, an unquestionably provocative smile.

Bird frowned and pulled his moustache. Momentarily he had the qualm of a person on roller skates when, feeling extremely solid and secure, he loses his balance and goes vaguely wobbling. Those looks of hers, the meeting of their eyes, the mysterious question or invitation in hers detected by him again and again down at Lippleford

and remembered with such agony during his bad time at Brighton! He had always known that there was something behind those looks, and he felt certain now that if he asked her she would admit it. Indeed he felt afraid that if he wasn't careful she would tell him so without being asked. It was essential that he should go on talking at once. Yet, ridiculously, he remained tongue-tied.

He got up, went to the window, and refreshed himself with a gulp of air. He spoke to her before leaving the window.

"Miss Glover——"

"Sir?" She said this quite impudently, mockingly.

He coughed and sat down again.

"Evelyn, can't you understand that when men are no longer as young as they used to be——"

"One moment," she said, in the same light tone. "Which of the two are you speaking about now—yourself or Mr. Heber?"

"Heber, of course."

The conversation for a little while was excessively difficult to Bird. It seemed as if, in spite of all his efforts, she was establishing the fact of there being a secret between them—a sort of guilty secret. But he would not have it. While fighting against it, in fact for purposes of defense, he lapsed again to the chaffy picnic manner. He heard himself saying, "Will you be serious? Stop laughing. Evelyn, I'm shocked by your levity. You ought to be ashamed of yourself"; and that sort of thing. Though he told her not to laugh, he laughed himself. Then, unaccountably, as on the previous occasion, they shook hands again.

Thenceforward the affair was conducted in a becoming style. She talked quite seriously. There was scarcely another smile.

"As to Wilfred," she said at last. "Well, of course, Wilfred is impossible."

"What do you mean by that?" said Bird, protesting rather feebly. "How impossible? In what way?"

"Oh, you know just as well as I do. Utterly *impossible*."

"I don't think you've any right to say that."

Evelyn shrugged her shoulders and spoke in a tone so deep that it sounded almost gruff. "To *me*, at any rate. Other people mightn't feel it as I did." And she twisted her fingers together and shivered, as if remembering something so distasteful that even its memory caused physical trouble. "Others, I dare say—probably—but not *me*."

Bird, watching her, remained silent.

"I'm awfully sorry that he should feel upset about it. But it is far kinder to be open and above board now and save ourselves from everything hateful that would be sure to come—afterward. If he can't see it—well, he ought to thank goodness that I saw it—and saw it in time, too."

She went on talking about her late betrothed, and Bird, although feeling that he ought to talk himself, still continued to listen. Perhaps he could not trust himself to speak. He was a prey to a burning curiosity which he knew he must not indulge; he wanted to ask questions. He felt tempted to extract from her even fuller information as to how Willy had so got upon her nerves, fed her up, and worn her down; and with this unworthy desire for more details there mingled once again that mean, that disgusting, but invincible satisfaction in the completeness of his bosom friend's failure. Unable to interrupt her and refusing to direct her, he allowed her to run on, until a poignant thought roused him from his shameful torpor. He had understood that while she chattered unrestrained

a monstrous treachery was being accomplished by him. He was abandoning the mission, he was tacitly accepting defeat.

He burst into voluble speech.

"No, no. Willy Heber is a *character*. He is very highly gifted by nature. No one knows, except myself, the clever things he can do. It's almost a breach of confidence to tell you—but he *writes*. Yes, writes for the newspapers. He is thinking of writing a book." Thus Bird prattled to her, talking now as if to a man at the club, assuming an easy attitude in the chair, crossing his legs. "You seemed to hint a minute ago that he is not good at seeing a joke. There I think you're quite wrong. He has a wonderful quiet sense of humour."

"Very quiet," said Evelyn gruffly, and moving on the sofa.

"Fact, I assure you. Oh, I don't pretend that Wilfred is everybody's money—I mean in general company. Only get him alone to yourself——"

"But I did," wailed Evelyn. "Always—always."

"I give you my solemn word that with a few pals—people he knows and likes—when he unbends and feels he is being appreciated—Wilfred can be the most amusing companion. He has a way of telling anecdotes—not *acting* them—but getting the fun out sharply, *pithily*. And one after another. Inexhaustible. Why, bless me, sometimes at the club he has kept us in such a roar——"

But while he said all this Bird had an undercurrent of thought that seemed to be talking at the same time. The lower, the inward voice was saying to him: "It's no use. I can't blink the truth. They wouldn't have hit it off. It's all very well to play the conqueror, show you mean to have the upper hand, and be master; but girls are dashed rum things. They know a trick or two, you bet.

They're so quick. You may think you have the better of 'em, but they get in under your guard. And they change—they keep on changing. . . . This girl Evelyn—well, I'm cured of my silliness, but I see now there's immensely more in her than I supposed. Being taken with her—that's over and done with. She's nothing to me. Why, if she and I were left on a desert island together for a thousand years. . . . What's she up to now? I wish she wouldn't look at me like this. . . . On a desert island. . . . I wonder . . ."

Evelyn was consulting a watch bracelet on her left wrist.

Bird rose with stiff dignity. And again—although knowing that it was useless—he reproached her for her treatment of his friend. He felt it essential to fire a few last shots at her. With dogged determination, as of an army beaten but retiring from the field in good order, not routed or permitting of close pursuit, he talked himself slowly toward the door.

". . . You shouldn't have done it. No. Of course I can quite understand that from your point of view, a man of forty-three or forty-five is simply an old fossil. Heber and I belong to another generation. Granted. You might have laughed at us both—from the very first."

"Oh, no," said Evelyn very earnestly.

"I shouldn't have blamed you if you had. The disparity of years——"

"But I didn't—I swear I didn't. You're *not* old. It's absurd to speak of yourself as if you were old." She said this with eagerness and in a tone that was obviously sincere. "Besides, if it comes to that, the man I am going to marry is much older than you or Wilfred."

"What's that you say?" cried Bird loudly.

Evelyn repeated with amplification.

"I say that Richard Palgrave, the man I'm engaged to, is at least fifteen years older than either of you."

"Do you really and truly mean that you are going to marry somebody else?"

"Yes."

Bird was more than staggered, he was thoroughly upset. He had no need to simulate indignation, he was so angry that he spluttered.

"No—hang it all. A joke's a joke—but this is a bit too hot—too thick altogether. You—you had this up your sleeve all the time you were fooling. You were engaged to the two of them at once, I suppose—dangling the pair of 'em——"

Evelyn stopped him with firmness and dignity. She told him not to be foolish, and not to say things for which he would have to apologize. She said that this Mr. Palgrave was a very ancient friend; in fact, had been a friend of her father; he had known her when she was "a kiddie." He had always been fond of her, but there was no engagement, no promise, nothing. Then when he saw her pledged to another he was very unhappy; and as soon as he learned that she was free again, he had come forward with his proposal. And she had accepted him.

While she made this narration to the amazed Bird, she was rummaging about in a drawer of the untidy writing table. Now she turned and held up a framed photograph.

"Come here," she said.

Bird went and stood beside her, and obediently gazed at what she showed him. It was the portrait of an elderly gentleman of forbidding aspect, dressed in a frock coat, with a vast black satin tie and a white slip under his waistcoat. To Bird's astonished eyes he seemed a hundred.

"It was taken a few years ago," said Evelyn, leaning against him in order to gaze at the same angle as his.

"Uncle Dick, I used to call him, when I was quite a small kiddie."

"Is that so?" said Bird. His anger had departed; everything had gone from him except wonder. His words became colloquial, his manner commonplace; he spoke as he would have spoken to a shop assistant—off-hand, but deeply interested, as when buying a new patent golf club, for instance.

"Plenty of oof, I hope?"

"No, he's not very rich—just comfortable," said Evelyn.

"Well, you surprise me. Will he settle what he's got?"

Evelyn ceased to lean against Bird's shoulder. She snatched the frame from his hand.

"I think you're being horrid now."

"No, really—it, it's only the surprise. I'm sure you have good reasons."

"Then for goodness sake shut up."

"Yes. Only, my dear Evelyn, as a pal, I mean—well, aren't you throwing yourself away?"

Then Evelyn, looking crestfallen and wistful, said some hurried sentences in which she seemed to embody Bird's own thoughts of an hour or so ago. She somehow indicated that hard-up, defenceless, lonely young women are often willing to renounce a great deal if they can obtain security in exchange. "And I like him," she concluded defiantly. "I have liked him all my life."

"I twig," said Bird gently. "Poor little girl. Poor little Evelyn"; and he put his hand on the dark hair and softly patted her head.

As he did it he felt entirely paternal. For she had changed still once again. Instead of being big and firm-bodied, she seemed to him slight and small—just a fragile,

graceful creature that ought to be helped and comforted by everybody strong and prosperous.

"Heaps of luck, Evelyn. That's what I wish you."

"Thanks." Then she spoke with one of her deep notes. "You know, I think you are rather a darling, Birdie—because you're so awfully kind."

"Oh—really——"

She put the photograph away, looked once more at her wrist watch, and spoke briskly and gaily.

"It's ten minutes to five. You'd better stay to tea after all."

"No, truly I mustn't."

"Do stay. Daphne will be glad to see you."

But he had grasped the handle of the door, and he was resolute.

"You'll tell him I'm sorry"; and Bird saw her do another of those queer shivers. "Oh, I don't know how you put up with him."

"Please——"

"I'll give him credit for one thing. Of course he absolutely adores you."

"And I am absolutely devoted to him," said Bird.

Evelyn made an impatient gesture.

"While he has got you, I don't know why he should want any one else. Besides, I'm not the only girl in the world. . . . I say. Why doesn't he try Daphne Yates or Amy Steel? I believe either of them would be ready to risk it—and I promise not to say a word to put them off."

"No, no, don't be so ridiculous."

Bird fled; but for fear of breaking his neck he had to go cautiously down the dark stairs. Evelyn followed him as far as the landing.

"I'll give you their addresses. It's worth thinking

about"; and she stood there, sending a ripple of laughter after him.

From the hall he looked upward, and could see her plainly in the light that the sitting room emitted.

She spoke again, quite softly.

"Good-bye—Birdie," and she kissed her hand.

"Good-bye—Eve," and he imitated what she had done.

A moment later he was walking smartly away from the house. He felt younger and yet older. He was strangely conscious of increased power. He felt that he now knew nearly all that there was to know about women. And this new sense of dominion or invincibility was due to the comprehensive knowledge. None could ever trouble him again. If he wished, he was master of them all.

CHAPTER VIII

"I CAN see the result in your face," said Heber. "She was adamant."

"Practically," said Bird.

This was in the hall of the Brighton hotel, where he found Heber waiting for him.

"Yes," he murmured, "I should be wrong to deceive you. I fear—no use hoping for any change in the—er—decision. But she told me to say she's dreadfully sorry. And you may take it from me she's very sensible of the honour you paid her, she respects you, she——"

"That's enough. I don't want to hear any more. . . . No, I mustn't be cowardly. You'd better tell me everything. Yes, I'll hear it all."

Bird craved for delay. Till face to face with his friend again—the sound man and this woefully sick man—he had not considered how difficult it would be to break the news. Instead of preparing himself for his duty, he had merely mused and dozed during the return journey in the comfortable Pullman car. Now he shrank with dread from the supreme part of the communication—that elderly gentleman in the black satin cravat, "Uncle Dick." It had to be done, but he felt that he really could not do it on an empty stomach. He asked Heber to let him have dinner first.

Heber sat with him at the meal, but himself did not eat.

After dinner, when they were trying to find a secluded corner in "the lounge," Heber detected the presence of

Mrs. Denham, and said, "Come away. There's that woman who dogs my footsteps."

They went down to the billiard room in the basement, where only one of the tables was as yet being used. They sat at the dimly lighted, far end of the long low room, and to the accompaniment of the clicking ivory balls and the monotonous voice of the marker as he called an extremely slow game, Bird endeavoured to get through his task. At the beginning Heber interrupted a great deal by questions.

He wanted to know how Evelyn was looking, and he put this particular question almost with ferocity.

"Very pretty, of course," Bird replied feebly, after a slight hesitation. "Very pretty indeed. That goes without saying."

"Then why the devil did you say it? To torture me, I suppose?"

After writhing upon the leather divan, Heber wished to know about her sitting room, also about her frock; and Bird gave him the fullest information, describing the littered aspect of the furniture, the initial airlessness, even the smell of varnish. He described, too, the serge skirt, the white blouse, and the black belt.

Then Heber asked to know if she smiled at all, and if so the manner of her smile.

Bird gave a little cough before answering this question, and passed a hand across his moustache rather nervously. "Yes," he said, as if searching his memory; "yes, she smiled—once or twice. Just in a kind, natural way."

Heber groaned. "Oh, my God, how I know that smile!"

"Just so. . . . Well, now, Willy, I'd like to tell you something I discovered—because that's the most important side of it. I think you fancied sometimes that

she may have fancied that we—I mean, that *you* were a bit too old for her. . . ."

Heber only groaned again, faintly.

"But it wasn't that, my dear fellow. The *age* wasn't the impediment. No, far from it. Oh, very far from it —as you'll say yourself when I tell you what I now have to tell you—what I can't avoid telling you."

Heber was leaning back on the divan, not collapsed, but limp, wretched; and could he have read, in the half light, the expression of Bird's face, he would have seen an enormous compunction as well as an overwhelming affection—such a look as kind people bear when obliged to administer an abominable dose of medicine to a faithful dog or perform a minor surgical operation upon a loved child.

"Well, it's like this, Wilfred. . . ."

And without further shilly-shally Bird gave him the old gentleman.

Heber was very bad after the revelation—worse, much worse than at any previous period. He refused food at ordinary meal times in the big coffee room, and would have sudden cravings for nourishment at impossible moments—when they were walking on the downs miles away from any place of entertainment, or late at night after the restaurant and the American bar were both closed. The days passed and no improvement was perceptible. To Bird, he suggested the well-known poetic image of a ship at sea, dismasted, helpless, drifting at the mercy of storm and wave. Bird, metaphorically, "stood by" like a stout tug, sending up rockets or burning flares as signals that he was there, hoping to effect a rescue when the fury of the tempest abated.

And to add to the wretchedness of it, the weather—the real weather—had turned nasty; rain beat continuously

against the vast sheets of plate glass of the hotel windows; the wind sent clouds of foam sweeping along the King's Road, drowning cabmen and horses on the stands, and hiding the turrets and pavilions of the pier. Heber would not stay within doors. They lived in their mackintosh coats; they were always wet through.

At last, one afternoon when they crouched dripping in a tenantless shelter on the seafront near Hove, it seemed to Bird that Heber had unexpectedly grown saner and calmer. He began to talk in a quietly reflective manner, without gaspings or groanings.

He told Bird that what had afflicted him was not only the loss of Evelyn, but the loss of all the happiness and peace that he had imagined as properly belonging to married life. He reminded Bird that he had never desired matrimony, had even scoffed at it, until love for this young lady had opened his eyes to its charming possibilities; then, with the stream of thought running in an altered channel, he had experienced a sharp revulsion of feeling against all his bachelor habits; he had given himself to the dream of an existence saturated with the spirit of femininity. In the dream he had seen himself surrounded by the little arts and graces of womanish custom, and he had liked it all immensely—even things that in the past had filled him with abhorrence, such as tall, slender vases of damp flowers at the corners of the dinner-table just where you are likely to knock them over, napkins twisted fantastically and thrust into wine glasses with a concealed piece of bread that tumbles to the floor when you unfold your napkin, books with ribbon book-markers or small bundles of crochet work with needles left upon the seats of chairs for you to sit upon inadvertently—in a word, women's tricks, women's ways, women's atmosphere.

And all through this sober explanation Bird kept say-

ing, with deepest sympathy, "I understand; I understand"; and when Heber fell silent he said it again. "Yes, I understand."

"No, you don't," roared Heber, losing his temper. "How the hell can you?"

Bird confessed then that he, too, had surrendered himself to the dream. He said that now it was all over there could be no harm in Heber's knowing that he also had been in love with Evelyn. He understood his friend's feelings because he himself had passed through all the phases of the tender passion.

"Is this true?" said Heber harshly. "Then you lied to me before! If you had told me the truth when I asked you, you might have saved me from all that has followed."

He got up, and, shaking the skirts of his drenched mackintosh as though casting off Bird for ever, he strode away through the rain.

But he was better from that moment. Next morning he had porridge for breakfast; at luncheon he ate heavily; at dinner he borrowed a pencil from Bird and wrote, on the back of the menu, a crushing indictment of the hotel management. Every day, every hour now, he became more like his old self.

One evening, after a game of billiards, he told Bird that it grieved him horribly to think of Bird's mortification in regard to Evelyn; he told Bird that there was nothing for Bird to do but be a man and forget all about her; he urged Bird to remember the apposite proverb that there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.

"Believe me, old boy, I don't think she's worth fretting for."

"I'm sure she's not," said Bird in a queer tone, and rather sadly. His words sincerely expressed his opin-

ion, and he had intended to utter them with heartiness and conviction; but as they formed themselves upon his lips and tongue he had felt again that inexplicable vague sadness—such sadness as is born of regret while only half-consciously one measures the extent of the irreparable, say the beauty of vanished summer days when autumn leaves are falling, the glory of childhood when one lends an arm to a decrepit old man; or the haunting sadness with which each of us is individually affected by certain verbal expressions, for instance, in the case of the individual Bird, "It might have been," and "The aftermath of tears."

Heber closed the conversation by employing the phrase that never failed to impress Bird deeply. It always seemed to convey so much grandeur of mind and such finality of purpose.

"Birdie," he said, "these are things which you and I must never speak of again."

Heber was normal now—except in one slight respect. That mawkish gentleness which had mingled or alternated with his fury was still apparent. It showed itself very queerly in his demeanour toward Mrs. Denham.

Instead of flying from her he now drifted toward her; he meekly sat by her in the lounge, he listened with courteous attention to her long stories about India, and once at least allowed her to take him to the theatre on the pier. He played dominoes with her staring daughter Janet. He bought another box of chocolates for her son Tony and sat nursing the boy on his knee. Bird began to feel quite out of it.

"Do you think," asked Heber, very gently and humbly, "that I have made up for what I fear must have seemed almost boorish when you first made me known to her?"

"Yes, I do," said Bird, not without irritation. "And, frankly, I think now you are going too hard on the other tack."

A few days after this they went back to London and thence to Lippleford. Bird was glad to get away from Brighton; he wanted never to see the place again; he was sick to death of it. But that homecoming to the cottage was a dismal, flat business.

As Bird said, with his occasional power of selecting a truism that exactly fitted, Lippleford in summer and Lippleford in winter were two different things. He stood at the window on the staircase, dolefully gazing forth as night descended on the estuary and hid the view that he had admired when it was all bright and gay, sparkling with sunshine and novelty.

After dinner Heber was petulant.

"I wonder," he said abruptly, "how many more times you're going to yawn like that."

"Don't know myself," said Bird.

"Why can't you go to bed, if you're sleepy?"

"I'm not so much sleepy as bored," said Bird. "Nothing to do—what! Would you care for a game of patience?"

"No, thank you."

"Oh, I say," said Bird, after further yawns. "Your book! Are you meaning to get on with the book?"

"Oh, curse the book," said Heber.

Next day they bicycled to Beach End and played golf in the rain. They failed to complete eighteen holes, not because of the rain, but because of a disagreement on the fourteenth green. In the evening they quarrelled rather badly.

"Look here," said Bird, with dignity and firmness, as he lit his bedroom candle, "this can't go on. You and I

have got upon each other's nerves, and we'd better part company."

"Yes, that's what I've been thinking myself," said Heber.

They made it up at once then; and threw themselves delightedly into the needed arrangements for closing the cottage, paying off Mr. and Mrs. Dunn, selling the boat, and so forth.

On the morrow they went to London, scarcely speaking to each other in the train although using the same compartment all the way.

Bird found rooms in Ryder Street that suited him excellently. He felt a very positive pleasure in being alone, free, able to do what he liked when he liked, without consulting the inclinations of other people. Meditating philosophically, he thought "Friendship is all very well. In a sense, it is perhaps the finest thing that life can offer; but it must not be allowed to degenerate into slavery. No, there *are* limits."

He enjoyed himself at his favourite club, playing interminable games of Snooker Pool and never tasting satiety at this blameless recreation.

But after three weeks, during which he had neither seen nor heard a word of Wilfred Heber, he grew fidgety. What the dickens was the old rascal up to now? Odd, his not making a sign. Friends, Bird reflected, need not be tied to each other as if they were Siamese twins, but on the other hand it is a bit thick if they behave as though they are in different continents. He was really delighted when the hall-porter at the club gave him a letter from W. H.

Heber briefly but very affectionately implored him to come to luncheon next day at an hotel in Jermyn Street,

and added in a postscript that he would meet an old friend.

It was a slight disappointment to learn that he would not get Willy to himself and have a good confidential talk; but nevertheless he went joyously, thinking, "I wonder if the old friend is Tom Vincent. Or perhaps it's that chap Adderley who lost such a lot of money with his fruit farm in California. . . . No, I believe it will prove to be Jackson, the doctor cove. That's who it will be." Then, on the threshold of the hotel, he had an agitating thought. Suppose it was Evelyn!

It was Mrs. Denham.

"Well," said Bird, gallant and effusive, "this *is* a charming surprise. Mrs. Denham!"

"Wrong name," said Heber, smiling at him. "Try again. Not Mrs. Denham."

"I don't follow," said Bird, puzzled, looking from one to the other. "*Not* Mrs. Denham?"

"Mrs. *Heber*," said W. H. "We were married yesterday."

CHAPTER IX

THE newly married couple had gone to the south of France, whence they would proceed to Italy, not returning to England until the spring; and Bird was alone in London—alone in the world, as it seemed to him. He made an entry in his diary (which at this period he started again) embodying a poetic quotation with regard to crowds and solitude.

Truly his sense of loneliness was very great. The fascination of the club faded. Existence became a dull routine of eating, taking exercise, and sleeping. But *cui bono?*—as he wrote in the diary.

Fulfilling a promise, he paid occasional visits to Heber's stepchildren at Richmond, where they had been placed as paying guests in an Anglo-Indian family. He took the poor deserted infants for a walk, gave them tea, bought them sweets, and although his natural kindness of heart sustained him, he found the hours spent with Janet and Tony a cruelly boring ordeal. It was, he thought, just like Heber, and "on a par with everything else" to have pushed this duty upon him.

"It will make Clarice so much easier in her mind," said Heber, "if she knows we can rely on you to keep an eye on them."

Clarice of course was the late Mrs. Denham.

Certainly Bird had not wanted to marry her himself; the idea of doing so had never once occurred to him; he had considered her merely as an agreeable hotel acquaintance, and in bidding her good-bye at Brighton had

only expressed a polite hope that they might meet again "one of these days"; yet he did bitterly resent her being snapped up behind his back, without by your leave or for your leave. That secret underhand wedding at a registry office disgusted him. About the whole business there was the flavour of treacherousness that Bird had tasted too often.

He resented the conduct of Clarice Denham also; but she had shown contrition. She had been apologetic, had indeed said she felt ashamed of having kept their kind friend in the dark; whereas Wilfred had appeared stupidly vainglorious, as if proud of his achievement.

A monstrous puzzle, anyhow. Bird endeavoured not to feel any sting in the fact that Heber had met with this rapid success after the previous disastrous failure; and asking himself why the lady had taken such a hurried step, he decided that she was of the marrying sort, the kind of person who cannot get on unless she has a husband, and who insists on having one—good or bad—without an hour's delay. Unquestionably she would have jumped at him, Bird, if he had given her half a chance.

But Heber's seeming repulsion, his horror—"Keep that woman away from me"—and all the rest of it? Bird decided on reflection that it had all been sincere at the time. Turning things over and over in his mind, he began to understand that the love-sickness induced by Miss Glover had shaken them both to their very foundations. It had changed them radically. Neither of them could ever be quite the same as he had been before its occurrence. So far as his friend was concerned, he now felt sure that Heber, who sank temporarily to an almost insane condition, was not yet really responsible for his actions.

And in his own case? Well, the after effects were obvious. This sense of recklessness would perhaps remain

with him as a permanent alteration of character. The reckless feeling was so very strong; not altogether unpleasant, but a little frightening. He remembered old timidities and shynesses with troubled wonder. Now he seemed to count risks as if they were of no moment; his whole wind seemed to be set in an absolutely devil-may-care attitude; with regard to small things or big things, a grandiose kill-or-cure method of treatment automatically suggested itself. And, together with the reckless sensations, there was that idea of enhanced power which he had first felt after his interview with Evelyn at her lodgings.

One need not perhaps add that all this remained purely mental, and nothing of it could be observed in his outward manner or appearance.

But, curiously enough, it caused an improvement in his golf.

Under the date of January Fifteen he entered in his diary: "Warm and muggy after the frost. Went down to Skeffington Park, where W. H. and I have so often played together, and again obtained greater length from the tee. Carried the 'Dreadnought' bunker at the tenth both morning and afternoon—a thing I never used to do. I seem, too, to get more *crispness* into my iron shots. Played, morning, with Brown the professional, taking a half, although of course he could give me a stroke a hole. But preferred not. I think I rather surprised him. He said distinctly improved; and he made a remark that struck me, though I have heard it before: 'Golf is really a matter of *temperament*.' True it is that I seem to look at it now from a different point of view, taking it much less seriously. Not worth bothering about—or anything else either! ! !" He put the three signs of exclamation to indicate subtle meaning, as was his custom,

and then made a further note:—"Man at lunch advised me to get one of those new aluminium feather-weight putters. N. B. See if they have them in stock at A. & N."

Often now he spent the whole evening seated before the fire in his own rooms; smoking much, thinking much, and even dreaming a little.

It seemed to him that during these solitary meditations his philosophical faculties were ripening in a remarkable manner. Thoughts as cynical as any of Heber's thronged upon him; generalizations just like those you read in books presented themselves one after another. Perhaps power of every variety was coming to him. It is often comparatively late in life that some of the strongest characters become mature—the books will tell you so. Deserted by friends, thrown entirely on his own resources, saddened too by disillusionment, he might now be finding himself—as the saying goes. From this point onward he might develop and spread along the new lines; and in imagination he saw himself no longer as the light-hearted, explosively laughing Bird of the past, but as a strong, silent personage known by all the world to be capable of performing great deeds, and directing the efforts of well-intentioned but weaker-spined subordinates. Seeing himself thus imaginatively, he was thinner, and at least three inches taller. But no—man cannot add to his stature by taking thought.

He mused about the game of golf, startling himself with the happy similes and universal applications that he was able instantly to hit upon. *Follow-through, Finish*—These are just as necessary for complete achievement in life as on a golf course. Some lives—it occurred to him—are all *back swing*. These people are always getting into a position as it were, taking their stance, bracing their muscles and nerves for the mighty effort, but never

doing any more—never bringing the club down, never hitting out boldly and freely.

That is wrong—very wrong. "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." He was half asleep in the chair, and beginning to dream. He dreamed that a radiantly beautiful handmaiden dressed in a very gossamer style came and kneeled before him, offering him, begging him to accept, a sort of magic staff or wand. "Take it, O All-powerful One," she murmured. "Use it, and none shall dare resist ye." "But what is it?" he kept asking. "Just tell me what it is, my dear . . ." "It is the feather-weight aluminium putter," she said at last; and he had only time to see that this was so when she vanished in the midst of a great noise.

He was awake again; a lump of coal had fallen from the grate and was smoking and smelling in the fender. He kicked it under the grate, shrugged his shoulders in a dare-devil style. Ha-ha! What next? "Another tot of whisky? No, I think not. Bed!"

Then during dreams that took place in the bed, the lovely handmaiden expanded into something more entrancing still. That ineffable Evelyn of his love-sick fancy slowly reconstituted herself—that daughter of the gods, the desired and desirable mate whom once in ten thousand years the immortals used to give to a child of earth, the phantom shape and the phantom bliss which, as it would seem, still haunt the secret places of men's hearts to-day because of the glory men touched in the dim but not yet forgotten past—all that swooning delight, the ecstasy of joy in attaining the unattainable, the anguish of regret in the forfeiture of what one might have held but let slip—all of this was with Bird once more as he dreamed and woke on his third floor in Ryder Street, St. James's.

Nor was this the end of the matter.

In daylight hours the real, the actual Evelyn persistently visited his fields of mental vision. He saw her just as he now knew her to be—that large, untidy girl, who shook the hair away from her dark eyes and looked at him and laughed at him so impudently. Commonplace—undoubtedly. Second-class—possibly. But a *jolly* girl, all said and done.

He wondered how she was getting along. Suppose he went and looked her up and found how affairs were going with her? Suppose he chipped in—even at this last moment—and saved her from that dull old gentleman?

It would be a dashingly reckless thing to do. But, then, he *was* reckless.

The horrid little road near the desolate and abandoned Earl's Court Exhibition looked sorrowful as well as muddy in the mingled dusk and fog of the winter afternoon. Bird could just make out the sweeping curves of the Great Wheel with its cars all motionless. It loomed gigantic but vague, as seen from Evelyn's doorstep. After ringing the bell he felt that his recklessness had abruptly forsaken him. Why came he here?

The door was opened by the landlady, who, as he fancied, looked at him with suspicion, even with hostility. She seemed mutely to repeat the question that he had just asked himself—"What do you mean coming here like this, trying to upset the peace of mind of my young lady, and to play tricks at the last moment with that good old gentleman's chance of securing happiness for the few years of life that remain to him? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Bird merely imagined this. The landlady was in fact

just as friendly as on the occasion of his former visit. She told him that Miss Glover had left her lodgings, and was staying with relations of the future bridegroom in Gloucestershire, where the marriage would soon take place.

"I suppose you'll be going down for the ceremony?" she added, with a bright and friendly smile.

"No, I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to attend," Bird muttered.

Then the landlady insisted upon giving him Miss Glover's present address, and he entered it in the small memorandum book that he always carried with him. He did not want the address. His entire mood had changed. He was very glad that he had not found Miss Glover here, and that she was in the country, a long way off.

He walked away feeling that he had escaped from a great danger.

It was two or three days after this that he chanced to meet Mrs. Fawcett at the Army & Navy Stores. He had gone there to see about the aluminium putter, and she stopped him all among the grocery on the ground floor.

"Why, it's Mrs. Fawcett!"

"How good of you to remember me, Mr. Bird. I took my courage in both hands before I spoke to you."

Of course he remembered this quiet elderly lady. It seemed to him only yesterday that he had last seen her knitting. He glanced at the capacious hand-bag that was slung round her wrist, and felt sure that it contained, among much else, steel needles and the foot of a stocking. He would not have been surprised if she had brought out her unfinished piece of work and begun to "turn the heel" while they stood talking.

They had drawn aside from the main alley of throng-

ing customers, and Bird stood with his back to a colossal trophy of biscuit boxes. The atmosphere all round him was heavy with odours of cheese and candles.

"Do tell me the news," he said cheerily. "I want to hear about everybody."

"That's very nice of you"; and Mrs. Fawcett smiled at him. "Who shall I begin with?"

"Yourself," said Bird, with gallantry. "*You*, first of all! How *are* you, Mrs. Fawcett?"

Mrs. Fawcett reported to the effect that she was very well indeed, never better.

"And our friend, Mrs. Toumlin? Have you seen her lately?"

"Ten days ago. She is not really well, Mr. Bird. You know, she suffers from rheumatism—her knee."

"Yes, I know. That knee gave her a lot of trouble—even in the warm weather."

Bird was elbowed from his position by a customer desirous of reading the names on the biscuit boxes, and he and Mrs. Fawcett drifted away to an adjacent waiting room where ladies were busily writing letters and a large clergyman—an important dignitary of the Church, if one might judge by the gaitered legs—dozed with folded hands while the female members of his family completed their purchases. Bird and his companion seated themselves and resumed their conversation.

"I want to talk to you about that silly girl, Evelyn Glover."

"Ah, yes," said Bird, stroking his moustache, but not quailing.

"Why did she let your friend Mr. Heber slip through her fingers in such a ridiculous way?"

Bird did not care for this. The turn of words appeared to him derogatory to the lady and too complimen-

tary to the gentleman. He cleared his throat, and looked grave.

"Oh, don't think I'm inquisitive," Mrs. Fawcett went on, in the quiet, unruffled manner that he remembered so well. "No, I have long ceased to indulge in curiosity about my neighbours' affairs, or to allow myself to be astonished by anything that happens to anybody."

"Exactly."

"Because, if so, one would have to keep in a state of astonishment all day long, wouldn't one? People do such inexplicable things, don't they?"

"Yes, they do," said Bird cordially.

"But I always thought Evelyn Glover had her head screwed on the right way and knew which side her bread was buttered."

"Not very much butter, I fear," said Bird, gently and kindly.

"No. So this seemed such a chance for her, didn't it? Then to be told it was broken off!"

"Just so——"

"And by *her*, apparently—not by him? That is, if I was correctly informed."

"Yes," said Bird guardedly, "I think you may take it that your informant had—ah—correct information there—substantially correct."

"Then what *was* the hitch? Mr. Bird, don't tell me if you prefer not. But it jumps to the eyes, as the French say, that there was some underlying mystery."

"Oh, no. Really it was quite simple." And Bird meditated for a moment as to how much and how little it would be proper and loyal of him to say. "They found out—perhaps both of them, but certainly one of them—I mean, ah, Miss Evelyn—that they were not so fond of each other as they had thought they were in the begin-

ning. And therefore—wisely as I think—they agreed to——" and he concluded with a gesture of the hand indicative of, or meant to indicate, separation by mutual consent without any acrimony and reproaches.

Mrs. Fawcett herself indulged in a meditative pause.

"I think I begin to understand," she said at its termination. "Yes, I think I can guess. Mr. Heber perhaps in some respects——" And as if with a change of thought, her tone, although as quiet as before, became slightly more animated. "You spoke of what they thought in the beginning! Well, what *we* all thought in the beginning—after we first met you both—— How shall I put it? But of course you know very well what girls are. Naturally you were both discussed—and the prevailing idea at first was—— But I mustn't be indiscreet. I can see that you don't like what I'm saying."

Bird liked it really, but he felt that it was dangerous and that if he gave way to it he might be unsettled by the thoughts it would engender. He knew that she was hinting that to begin with, he, Bird, and not Heber, had been the one favoured by Evelyn.

He coughed, and resolutely pulled the conversation to safer ground.

"I suppose you heard that Willy Heber has married somebody else."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Fawcett. "Otherwise, I should have hoped that the break with Evelyn was not final. But perhaps you haven't heard that *she* is marrying somebody else?"

"Yes, I did hear. It's to be very shortly, I understand."

Then, to keep the conversation in the right area and within close bounds, he told her about his friend's wife; describing her as a widow from India, a very charming

woman, who possessed a useful adjunct to her personal attractions in the shape of an assured income of over three thousand a year.

"Then they'll be quite rich?"

"Yes, with what Heber has, they'll really be very well off."

"And no drawbacks, Mr. Bird?"

Bird told her that the only things you could possibly call drawbacks were the two children of the first marriage —a girl who had a trick of staring fixedly and a bothering sort of little boy. But then he softened this condemnation; remembering their forlornness among strangers at Richmond, he felt it was unkind, and he said that on the whole they were very nice children. He had no doubt that Heber would become greatly attached to them.

"Children are *winning* creatures, Mrs. Fawcett."

"Yes, if they happen to be your own children, Mr. Bird. If they're somebody else's I don't know that they always win."

There was a robustness about Mrs. Fawcett's intellect, together with the reposefulness of her manner, that pleased Bird. He felt that this long chat with her was doing him good. He gallantly offered her tea; and they remained at their small table upstairs in the refreshment room for an immense time. Once, when she opened her bag, he felt sure that she was going to bring out the knitting. But she did not do so. She merely blew her nose.

This was just when he had been expanding philosophically about woman's place in society, her special qualifications, the limits of her capacity, and so on. Mrs. Fawcett had asked what was to be the future of women. Did he believe in this movement for their emancipation? Would it ever be wise to give them parliamentary votes?

"Honestly I think," he said, summing up, "that women are a good deal safer in their proper place."

"But what *is* their proper place, Mr. Bird?"

"Well, I suppose, the domestic hearth—and all that. *Someone* must conduct household matters, mustn't they? —run the establishment——"

"And attend to the comfort of you lords of creation," said Mrs. Fawcett, with a restful smile. "Yes, I believe you're right. It comes back to that in the end. Girls can't get on by themselves, and I believe it will be centuries before they're able to—if ever."

"Exactly."

"I am very fond of girls. I know a lot of them. I like to go about with them. At my age I consider it a privilege to be allowed to do so. But I have always sought young people's company. I have tried to keep myself young."

"And you have succeeded," said Bird, with a graceful little bow.

"But the more I see of them"—Mrs. Fawcett ignored his compliment—"the more I see of them, the more convinced I am that they can't be trusted to take care of themselves. They all need *ballast*. They are blown about by every wind; they—— For instance, take those two girls, Daphne Yates and Amy Steel!"

"Oh, yes," said Bird alertly. "How about them? Where *are* they, Mrs. Fawcett? You haven't given me any news of them."

Mrs. Fawcett said they were both in London at the moment, staying together in a small flat that somebody had lent them, somewhere in the Bloomsbury district. But Daphne was going to Paris almost immediately. She had obtained a temporary job as governess or secretary or something.

"Poor Daphne! You know, Daphne had an unfortunate love affair."

"Yes, I did hear a whisper to that effect."

"A man treated her badly."

"What a bounder!" said Bird, with indignation.

"He led her to expect—or at any rate, she did expect—— But all that is ancient history. She didn't seem able to get over it—just at first. She has now—quite. . . . I fancy, Mr. Bird, that you didn't see anything in Daphne?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. But I didn't have the honour of much talk with Miss Daphne. I thought her very pleasing. A nice, quiet little thing!"

"Quiet? Did she strike you as quiet?"

"Yes. Isn't she? A bit excitable, too—as I remember now. Very excitable, isn't she?"

Mrs. Fawcett blew her nose again; but did not answer.

"Amy Steel is the quiet one," she said, putting the handkerchief back into the bag. "Still waters run deep, Mr. Bird. I am fond of Amy; but I don't know that I trust Amy further than I can see her."

Bird seemed rather shocked by this.

"Don't misunderstand me," said Mrs. Fawcett. "I'm not hinting at anything wrong. No, Amy is a good girl—a perfectly straight girl. But she does keep her plans and intentions so very much to herself. Whereas with Daphne there's no reticence—not enough, perhaps. With her, all the world may know what's going on. . . . . By the way, why don't you go and see her?"

"Oh, I wouldn't venture."

"They'll be very glad to see you."

"Oh, no, I can't flatter myself——"

"I'll give you the address."

Bird had automatically produced his memorandum

book, and he entered the address. "Well," he said, jotting it down, "perhaps, if I found myself in that direction, one of these afternoons."

It was on the very next afternoon that he happened to find himself in the direction. Their little flat was at the top of a gloomily dark building, but it was quite bright and cheerful when once you got inside. Indeed he received so charming a welcome that he felt delighted he had yielded to the temptation.

Miss Amy Steel, dressed in hat and walking costume, opened the door to him.

"Now this is kind of you," said Miss Steel, almost with emotion, although in the languid, if not drawling voice that was her remembered idiosyncrasy. "This is really kind of you."

"I took my courage in both hands," said Bird, quoting a phrase of Mrs. Fawcett's that had impressed him by its originality. And he followed Miss Steel into the tiny drawing room, and stood beaming at her. "Yes, I took my courage in both hands."

"Or in both feet?" said Miss Amy, with unusual playfulness. "That was where you need courage—to climb up all those stairs. Isn't it a shame that they don't have a lift?"

"Well, you *are* up in the clouds, aren't you?" said Bird, chuckling; and he praised the wide prospect that was offered by the two narrow windows. He knelt one knee upon the cushioned window seat in order to admire. He could see the towers and minarets of St. Pancras railway station, distant ridges of open country, with the whole of northern London stretching between.

"How did you trace me?" asked Amy Steel. "How did you mark me down in my aerie?"

He had only time to accustom himself again to her red hair and blue eyes, the broadness of her figure, her occasional intensity in the midst of languor, when Miss Daphne Yates came bouncing into the room. She, too, was in out-of-door garments; with a fur-trimmed toque like a Russian soldier's head-gear set low on her fair curls, and a long fur stole wrapped about her slim little body. She seemed even smaller and more vividly alive than she had been in his memory of her. He had forgotten also those two rows of pearly white little teeth, disclosed again now in a merry, friendly little smile.

"This good kind man," said Amy Steel, "has put himself to endless trouble to hunt me out and come to see me. Isn't it sweet of him?"

Then almost immediately both girls were questioning him about Wilfred Heber's marriage. They were keenly interested in this, and he had to tell them all that he had told Mrs. Fawcett, and more—about Mrs. Heber's private means, her elegance and refinement, and her desire to find a suitable London residence.

"If possible, they want to get one of those Queen Anne houses in Buckingham Gate—you know, looking into the barracks, near Buckingham Palace."

"Oh, why don't they take the Palace itself?" said Daphne, laughing.

"Yes, they will be swells," said Amy, seriously and thoughtfully. "Regular society people! They won't consent any longer to know people like *us*."

"Who brought them together?" asked Daphne.

"I did," said Bird.

"*You* did?" And Daphne laughed again. "What a match-maker you are!"

"Match-maker!" This amused Bird greatly. "Ha-ha-ha. What next? Match-maker indeed! Nothing of

the sort. What ideas you get hold of, Miss Daphne"; and he shook his head at her reprovingly.

Then they spoke of Daphne's imminent sojourn in Paris. Her departure from London would occur on the morrow. She had already packed her luggage.

And then Miss Amy Steel confessed to something which the fact of her recent appearance at the front door in her hat and jacket might almost have led Bird to divine, had he thought about it—a confession that she was on the point of going out when he rang the bell and came in. She was obliged to go to a photographer's in Gower Street. She would go now and be back again directly. Daphne offered to go for her; but Amy said she must attend to the business herself.

"Only," she added with intensity, "don't let Mr. Bird run away till I come back." And she said the same thing, smiling at them from the opened door. "I rely on you to keep Mr. Bird."

"I'll do my best," said Daphne.

As soon as the door closed and he and she were alone, Bird made a statement.

"It was *you* I came to see, really."

"Oh, I sha'n't believe that."

"Honour bright and shining."

"Mr. Bird"—she was making an odd little sound of mirth—as of a small musical instrument playing an accompaniment to her words—"Oh, Mr. Bird, I think you are a gay deceiver."

"Oh, good gracious, what names will you call me next?"

Bird was delighted; thinking "Badinage, badinage—what fun it is. A bit of sharp give and take!" And he spoke joyously and chaffingly. "If there was a witness present, I'd have you up before the authorities for slander and libel."

"Oh, would you?—and they'd dismiss the charge."

"No, they wouldn't. They'd make you pay heavy damages—for trying to take away my character in this outrageous manner."

They had gone to the window; and while rattling on so brilliantly, Bird observed, as if for the first time, the light colour of her eyes, those pretty silky curls beneath the fur border of her hat, her sharp little nose and chin, the whole small face so fragile but so firm. Now that he was quite close, looking down at her, he could see tiny freckles —little marks, he thought poetically, where the jolly old sun had caressed her cheeks and forehead. That vibration of excitableness that had always seemed to issue from her was very perceptible at these close quarters.

"Lippleford, Miss Yates! What days those were! D'you remember how you bound up my finger?"

"Yes. Let me look at it." In the most businesslike, professional manner she took his hand and examined the finger. As she did so his memory was abnormally active. How well he remembered this absorbed, attentive look in the eyes, this hardening of the mouth, this almost defiant air as of the trained surgical nurse at work with a patient. And he noticed that the vibration had increased. He was beginning to vibrate himself, sympathetically. "Yes," she said, in a low serious voice, "there's a cicatrice still showing," and she dropped his hand.

"Why don't you say I shall carry it to my grave?" he spluttered laughingly. "Anyhow, you did all you could for me, didn't you? And I don't believe I ever thanked you properly? . . . I say—we sold the boat."

And there were more "D'you remembers?" Till Miss Daphne, suddenly laughing as if overcome by amusement, said, "Yes, and do you remember how you hit Amy with the boat-hook?"

"Ha-ha-ha! How unkind to remind me of my clumsiness. I do hope I didn't hurt her."

"Of course you hurt her." And Daphne had a queer enigmatical expression in her eyes, but spoke gravely. "She seems to have forgiven you all right."

"Oh, I say. What on earth d'you mean by that?"

This deeper plunge of their gay chatter entranced, enraptured him.

"Why haven't you taken off your hat? Take off your hat."

"I'm obliged to you for the suggestion. But I think not, Mr. Bird." The businesslikeness of her tone as she said this was really adorable. She assumed, too, a sort of authoritative, patronizing air, as if she had been a solid man of the world talking to an importunate child.

"Oh, I wish you'd take it off."

"Do you? I wonder why."

"Because—because I want to see your pretty hair—all of it."

"Oh, is *that* your ambition?" She said this just in the same style as before. "Well, far be it from me to deprive any one of innocent pleasures"; and she raised her hand and pulled out one long hat pin.

Bird was really contorting himself, in rapture. He thought, "There's no getting away from it—wonderful things, girls! So dashed quick, when you once get to chaffing terms with them—espièglerie, sheer roguishness, what!" And suddenly he was conscious of the dead weight of attributes which he believed to be common to all of his sex. In a moment he seemed to feel—crushingly—his slowness of wit, his heaviness of mind and body, his size round the waist, the thickness, the solidity of his thighs and calves. He wanted to say something sparkling and could not. She had pulled out the other hat

pin; and she was looking at him, not mockingly, but tantalizingly, as if she for her part was conscious of her quickness and lightness. She seemed to him a personification of the whole girl-tribe—no, of one particular aspect of the girl-enchantment. Slenderness, provocation, defiance. . . .

She was taking off her hat. It was off. She handed it to him, and without giving ground to her he put it on the seat of a chair.

In the following moment the sense of power returned to him; mastery, dominion, if he cared to exercise it. Recklessness, as of a great flood, swept him from the realm of thought into violent action. Amazingly he folded Miss Yates in his strong masculine arms and kissed her—not once, but again and again. Never in his life till now had he taken such a liberty. Ravished kisses were an absolute novelty.

She did not repulse him, she did not respond to him; she was passive. Any struggle about it he made himself. In the midst of the intoxicating adventure he was dimly aware that the vibration had altogether ceased, and a murmur of her voice sounded faint and sweet—"Mr. Bird, really, I am surprised at you,"—with no mirth in the words and certainly not anger.

Directly he let her go he saw that she did not mind. Indeed she was very cool and collected.

Not so Bird. He sat down in a shattered condition, flushing and breathing hard.

As soon as sustained conversation was possible to him he left his chair, and sat beside her on the window seat. They sat there quite quietly, hand in hand. But when he wanted to begin again she checked him.

"Do what you're told. Don't be a naughty boy."

Naughty boy! Bird was in Elysium. She said it

again—"Naughty boys must learn to behave themselves." The words seemed to change into electric currents flashing along his vertebral column, bursting through the top of his head, and then descending upon him in a shower of sparks and rose petals. "See," she said, looking at her hand, so absurdly small as it lay against his, "What a contrast!"

"Yes," said Bird ecstatically, "isn't mine a great clumsy paw?"

And there was an exquisite silence.

"I say, Daphne—about your going away! *Must* you?"

"Afraid I must."

"Oh, what a pity!" He kept on saying this. "What a pity. It does seem such an awful pity."

"Yes, doesn't it—now? But of course, when I made the arrangement"—and she smiled at him, and yet had that adorably serious matter-of-fact way that was bewitching him more completely every moment—"I did not foresee, I had no expectation of these startling occurrences."

"How long will you be away?"

"Six months."

"Oh, that's really too long. Daphne, it *is* too long. I swear I sha'n't be able——"

Suddenly and unexpectedly the palm of Daphne's small hand was being pressed upon his mouth.

"Look out," she whispered; and she sprang up lightly and stood at a little distance. "I heard the hall door. It's Amy."

Miss Steel came into the room bustlingly.

"Have I seemed an awful time? I simply raced there and back."

CHAPTER X

THAT tumultuous climax of recklessness and the subsequent tenderly quiet conversation on the window seat filled Bird with a sentimental yearning that, as one might suppose, must result in ultimate union with the object of his compliments and caresses. No definite request had been made, no promise given; yet any other conclusion to the pretty little opening episode must be unexpected, abnormal, wrong. But, as Mrs. Fawcett said, people do inexplicable things; and a few days less than six months afterward Bird married—not Miss Daphne Yates but Miss Amy Steel.

For months he did not know that it was going to happen. Only once or twice he thought, "Ought I to be so thick with Amy now that Daphne is away?" Daphne was in Paris; he was left to Amy, who remained in London. Daphne in Paris answered his letters queerly, lightly—sometimes did not answer them at all. Daphne, writing lightly, spoke of Parisian gaieties, of young male companions at dances and on race-courses. Bird offered to go to Paris, if it would be agreeable and convenient to her; and she replied by telegram that he had better not. Bird felt piqued and huffed by this extremely prompt answer. It made him pull his moustache and frown.

Meanwhile there was Amy, enveloping him in a kindness that grew more and more proprietorial in its manifestations. He went about with her—to restaurants, to theatres, on suburban excursions. One blazing hot after-

noon in June he took her down to Skeffington Park golf course and they had tea on the lawn behind the house. It was very pleasant—sitting in the shade and looking at the sunlight through the tree branches, which began to dance and sway presently as a delicious breeze sprang up. Long after tea, when nearly all the golfers and visitors had gone, she asked him as a special favour to knock about with his clubs.

"I want to see how it's done. I'm a regular ignoramus about golf."

"Never too late to learn," he said gaily; and he trotted across the lawn to the dressing rooms to doff his waistcoat and fill his pockets with balls.

At the first tee they had to give precedence to two enthusiasts who were just starting a round in spite of the late hour.

"Stand over here," said Bird, taking her by the arm and drawing her toward the box of sand. "Here, we're out of the way . . . Now hush," he whispered, smiling at her. "Not another word. Don't breathe till they've hit off." Then when the first man had struck a ball, Bird added in the same sort of facetious whisper, "On a golf course, young ladies should be seen and not heard."

It was rather nice pulling her by the arm and ordering her about before these two other fellows, who, as it seemed to him, had both regarded her with discreet admiration. This afternoon she was dressed in a white frock, and she wore white shoes and a straw hat with a mauve ribbon. Her parasol was also mauve. It was her favourite colour. Though you mightn't have expected it to do so, it went well with her white skin and red hair. Bird felt proud of her.

Then for some time he became engrossed by his beloved

amusement. Placing six clean white balls upon six little mounds of sand, he hit them away one after another. They sailed off in majestic style.

Amy was enraptured.

"But you play *magnificently!*" she said, with enthusiasm. "And you have been so modest about it. I simply hadn't a notion that anybody could make a golf ball fly such a distance. I don't believe anybody else could, either."

"Oh, what nonsense!" said Bird, laughing, both gratified and amused. "I assure you I'm a very average performer."

"I don't believe it. No, you won't make me swallow that."

He showed her more prodigies with his wooden club; and initiated her in the crispness required for iron work. The time passed rapidly. With the increasing wind he did not suffer from extreme warmth. She hunted for the balls, bringing them to him as if they had been eggs that she had found; she rested for a long while in the Dreadnought bunker; and they had a merry and exciting chase together, over the rough, when the wind blew away her mauve parasol. It was all very jolly, and Bird thoroughly enjoyed himself.

Being hungry after it, they dined at the humble hotel in the village. Alone together on the slow train journey, they talked of golf and poetry, and exchanged confidences about their early youth. The moonlight on the Thames as the hansom cab took them across Waterloo Bridge threw a glamour and romance over their final quarter of an hour.

He was now really "thick with her," and should not have been surprised when she said to him one day, "I want to know exactly how you stand with Daphne Yates."

"I don't know, myself," said Bird feebly, trying to laugh it off.

"Oh, but you *must*."

"I assure you I don't." And this was true. He did not know.

"Well, hadn't you better find out?" said Amy. "I think I have a right to demand it."

Bird did not agree to this, but he let it pass. They were in the train again, on their way to Hampton Court, and for a few moments he looked out of the window. When he turned round he was distressed to see that Amy's eyes had filled with tears.

"Oh, my dear girl—I say. Don't."

The moisture in those blue eyes and a kind of rhythmic upheaval that seemed to be disturbing her chest unmanned him, and he was without force to resist the series of questions with which she now assailed him. He somehow had to answer, although every answer made him more uncomfortable.

"You admire her?"

"Oh, yes—in a *way*."

"You are writing to her. You admitted it. Why? I want to know why you write to her. Does she write to you?"

"Now and then."

"Are you engaged to her?"

"No, certainly not—no, no engagement."

"Had you seen her—I mean, since we were all at Lippleford? . . . Had you seen her before you met her at our flat?"

"Oh, no."

"When I went out and you were alone with her, did you propose?"

"No—I've said so already."

"But you told her you liked her?"

"Well, yes, I implied it."

"You kissed her, I suppose?"

In Bird's own pet phrase, there *are* limits. Flushed, confused, troubled he might be, but he was still gallant, chivalrous, and nothing would have made him answer this last question. Amy, however, needed no answer.

"Oh, I know Daphne," she said scornfully and indignantly; her eyes dry now and flashing. "When was Daphne ever alone with a man for five minutes that she didn't make him kiss her?"

"Really, no, I say—I must protest——"

"If you had had a little more experience of Daphne—— If I told you things about Daphne——"

Bird held up his hand and stopped her with a firm voice.

"I can't listen to anything of that sort. Please don't say anything against your friend."

"She's *not* my friend," said Amy, with heat. "I believe she has tried to be my deadly enemy." Then she pouted, and both her eyes and her voice grew soft as she drew closer to Bird, almost nestling to him in his corner by the carriage window. "I didn't mean to speak against her. But this I must say—in justice to myself. If it was no more than kissing her, she wouldn't think anything of that."

"If I took that view," said Bird, pulling his moustache. And he repeated the words without further expressing his thoughts. "Of course, if I took that view——"

He became silent and gloomy, not responding to Amy's enthusiasm as they moved about the old palace, passing through Wolsey's courtyards and under William the Third's archways without noticing them. He was thinking of the sort of things that Amy might have said if he had not stopped her. He thought, "Daphne is hot stuff.

That's what it amounts to. Old mother Fawcett hinted as much." And he felt a wound in his pride as he thought further that Miss Daphne had played the fool with him. No one likes that—or to be made to look ridiculous.

On the homeward journey Amy spoke with visible emotion of the dear old days at Lippleford, the drive in the wagonette, and the picnic in the woods across the water. She reminded Bird that when he inadvertently struck her with the boat-hook he had addressed her as "dear Miss Steel." She said that she believed nobody but herself had noticed his little slip in giving her that affectionate adjective. Finally she told him that she was very fond of him, and seemed to imply that from the first he had inspired in her the sort of faithful attachment that does not permit itself to be thwarted or beaten off—not even by boat-hooks.

Bird surrendered then and their lips met, sealing the compact. He glowed with a quite unexpected happiness in having gained this deep, silent sort of affection, and was proud to think that he had the power as well as the wish to reward it.

But that night he could not sleep. His bedroom in Ryder Street was hot and airless; he felt thirsty, feverish; he had distressing sensations of want of space, loss of freedom, forfeiture of free will. And during this torment of insomnia he thought guiltily and remorsefully of Daphne Yates. His conversation with Mrs. Fawcett haunted him; her very words kept echoing in his ears. "You know, she had an unhappy love affair." Yes, "a bounder" had treated her badly—leading her to expect things. Now, he thought, the poor child had met with another unhappy love affair. Another bounder, what?

Shame and regret overwhelmed him. He began to ask

himself how Daphne would take it, what would she say, what would she do? Suddenly a dreadful supposition made him puff and blow, and then feel cold and clammy all over his restless body. Suppose Daphne committed suicide? A highly strung, nervous, excitable girl—a very sensitive girl—proud girl, too—a girl who has taken the knock once, but goes down—lets herself be counted out—beneath a second blow. It seemed to him a terrible danger, very real and perhaps imminent. How avert it? Go to Paris first thing in the morning and break the news to her. No delay. News travels fast—awful to get there too late. And in imagination he *saw* Paris—a bridge, the river, a part of the quay. People were running and shouting. Mademoiselle in the water. English mademoiselle—threw herself over the parapet of the bridge. Yes, plunge—plunge!

Bird rose from his imaginary dive breathless, suffocating.

After a time he grew calmer, but scarcely more comfortable. Sadness, sentimental yearning, vast personal sorrow oppressed him. He thought of the vibratory phenomena that went with Daphne, the queer enchantment of her air and manner, that businesslike self-possession that she preserved even during supreme moments; and, in his own case, the almost devastating joy that close contact with her had produced. How strange that he should have forgotten all that in these last months and remember it so clearly now! And he thought, yearningly, that he ought not to have allowed himself to be put off—he should have been bold to the end; not timid, as he had been, after the beginning. Perhaps destiny had intended him for Daphne. With Daphne he might have found what his innermost heart had been seeking. Daphne had something to her—something that might have brought out the

very best of him. She was not the ineffable goddess of his dreams, but because of mysterious, unanalyzable attributes she was nearer to it than either of those other two. He sighed heavily.

In the morning he was all right again, sensible and philosophical, able to see the ridiculousness of his night fears and emotions. Daphne bowled over by disappointment? What next? Daphne of course had been laughing at him. Little minx. Daphne was up to her tricks in Paris, fooling the young French viscounts and making game of old French stockbrokers and bankers. Whereas dear Amy——

"I'm a very lucky fellow," he said to himself cheerily.

He and Amy became a fully engaged couple amidst the loud rejoicings of her entire family. The family came as a shock to Bird. Although devoid of all snobbish ideas, indeed too simple to understand the finer kind of social distinctions, he could not but observe the obvious fact that these people were "not quite up to the mark"—as he expressed it in his secret thoughts. Amy herself showed nervousness and anxiety when presenting him to her relatives and gratitude afterward when he made no unfavourable criticism. They welcomed him effusively, and he was very frank and cordial in accepting their courtesies. An uncle and aunt lived at Tulse Hill; there was a married brother at Penge; and the mother had temporarily established herself at Surbiton. There were cousins apparently situated all round greater London.

Mrs. Beardsley, his future mother-in-law, had been married twice and lost both husbands—"by death," as she said herself. She was very fat and big, and Bird could not "take to her," although manfully pretended that he did. It was not merely that she immediately aroused a very painful thought against which he had to struggle

with all his strength—the thought that "This is Amy twenty-five years hence, if her hair fails her and she is obliged to wear a wig." It was also because he seemed to know instinctively that she had neglected Amy, never done enough for her, let her shift for herself; and that now the principal part of her joy was due to the certainty she need never again do anything at all for Amy. She almost said so.

"It's such a blessing to feel that our A. is provided for."

In one respect she might have pleased Bird, since she shared his partiality for proverbial sayings; but she used her proverbs in a tactless manner that was very unpalatable to him. "It's a long lane that has no turning, isn't it, Amy?" she said, nodding and smiling at her daughter. "Handsome is that handsome does." Then, with smiles for Bird, "A woman is as old as she looks and a man's as old as he feels." And again she touched on the soundness of the financial side of Bird. "Kisses and bread and cheese—that's good fare for *courtship*. But marriage is another pair of shoes. I always say, Love flies out at the window when want comes in the door."

What did it matter? He must do the civil now, but he need not see too much of Mrs. Beardsley later on. Like many another honest fellow in his situation, Bird thought, "After all, it's my wife I'm marrying. I'm not marrying her family."

Amy was fond of him, really and truly fond of him. Every day she surprised him by the magnitude of her fondness, and every day, responding to the irresistible appeal, he grew fonder of her. He did not believe that she had fallen in love with him at first sight down at Lippleford. No, that was absurd; she deceived herself if she now thought it true. But probably she had at once resolved to make him hers if she could. She had

said nothing about it to anybody. Only chance could help her; she had waited for the chance. Mrs. Fawcett had said of her "Still waters run deep." He thought of this with complete tolerance now. Why not? All the more credit to her.

Dimly he seemed to understand that she was much more primitive, more elemental by nature, than those other girls. She was neither fanciful nor calculating. She was a warm-hearted, passionate girl, really, beneath that outward mask of lethargy; perhaps the essentially typical girl who is guided by instinct and is controlled only by nature's laws; the primitive girl who needs a mate and will get him, somehow, anyhow, if she can.

Her affection for Bird, the captured mate, was now violent, hungry, overpowering. She was almost fierce when she hugged him. She surprised him, she made him blush.

"I want every bit of you," she said, with her arms round his neck, holding him so strongly and fiercely that he was still further surprised. "Every little bit of you—do you hear? If anybody ever tries to come between us I'll tear their eyes out—I'll trample on them—I'll kill them. You're mine—*mine*—nobody else's."

And most of all she surprised him with a storm of retrospective jealousy in regard to Evelyn Glover. She had never said a word more about Daphne; but without the least warning she burst into violent abuse of Evelyn.

"How could you like her for a moment? And you did—you know you did. Birdie, how could you?" And she squeezed his arm and wrenched at his hand with such strength that she positively hurt him. "She's a rotten selfish creature, Eve is, and I hate her. She sides and swaggers, and thinks of nobody on earth but herself. I

hate her. I hate her. I won't ever let her come into our house. Do you hear? On no pretense. I don't want you ever to see her again—and you sha'n't if I can prevent it. . . . Birdie, promise me you'll never try to see her. Promise it."

He promised, of course. He gave way to his Amy in everything. He was unable to resist her.

Although he pleaded for another locality, she made him take a house at Beaver's Hill in the Ealing and Acton region. Although he begged for quietness and a lack of ostentation on the happy day, she insisted that the wedding must be one of adequate pomp at a Surbiton church, with a reception at a neighbouring hotel afterward. During these days Bird was in a whirl of excitement, busy with his cheque book, buying his own trousseau as well as Amy's. He felt that he was embarking on a tremendous adventure; and like the bride in old-fashioned novels, he whispered to himself "In three days from now my new life begins."

On the last night of his bachelorhood he gave a large dinner-party at the club. He did this not so much from inclination as from a belief that it was the right thing to do. They had the use of the committee room, where he had attended many such feasts. Smythe, who was to act as best man, made a witty speech in proposing his health.

Then he went back to Ryder Street for his last night in bachelor diggings, and found there, waiting for him, a letter from Daphne Yates. He recognized the handwriting, lit his pipe, and stood among the packed portmanteaux for a considerable time before he opened the envelope. What would Daphne say in reply to that long-delayed explanatory letter that he had sent her three days ago?

Daphne said, without any signature after it:

Congratulations or condolences? Accept whichever you think suit best.

Next day was dreamlike, chaotic, quite unreal. He seemed to be an actor in a grand pageant. He scarcely recognized his mirrored reflection, so splendidly was it apparelled, with white waistcoat, white flower, and patent leather boots. He shook hands with strangers, he cut old friends, he laughed foolishly. The best man held his arm, guided him. The solemn yet joyous church steadied his nerves; the music made him feel as if it would float him into the air. The sight of his bride coming up the aisle made him melt within his waistcoat and then swell to a gigantic size. She was a vision of loveliness—yet so sweet, so meek, so good, that he felt no man who ever lived could be worthy of her. The words of the service almost brought tears to his eyes. "For better for worse" —and so forth. He vowed more than the book told him. "Yes, my darling, I'll be true to you, I'll be good to you, I'll make you happy or die in the attempt!"

It was over; and he was proudly coming down the aisle, his wife upon his arm, the music swelling loud behind them. The big doors of the church stood open; he could see the sunshine, the crowd, the hired carriage and the bouquets, with a policeman, and people laughing, holding up their arms, ready to throw confetti; and at that moment, swift as lightning, there flashed into him and out of him a thought. It came from nowhere—as if the devil had sent it. It passed through him and was gone. But he knew the thought had been there—the thought that he had made a horrible mistake; a mistake not in marrying Amy instead of Daphne, but in marrying anybody at all.

CHAPTER XI

LATE in the following autumn Mr. and Mrs. Heber came to dine with them at Beaver's Hill.

The Hebers, failing to obtain one of those desirable houses at Buckingham Gate, had established themselves in Colwyn Street, Mayfair; and Amy Bird, awestruck by the splendid fashionable associations of that word "Mayfair," had insisted that "the first move," as she called it, should come from them, since they were obviously setting up as "regular society swells" and might be inclined to give themselves all sorts of airs.

Bird was upstairs in the joint bedroom helping Amy with the minute shoulder buttons of her pretty blouse when the arrival of the guests announced itself by horn blasts and a whirring of machinery in the roadway beneath the windows.

Leaving a button torn from its socket in Bird's fingers, Amy sat down upon a chair as if her legs had failed her.

"They've come in a car," she whispered faintly.

"Yes, by Jove. How sporting!"

It should be remembered that at this period motor cars not only made a great noise but were still a novelty; moreover, they symbolized wealth, fashion, dashingness, and all sorts of other splendid things. The heart seemed to go out of Amy as she listened to the noisy engine and thought of all that was implied by it.

Bird, unwilling to wait for the parlourmaid to usher his friends into the drawing room, scampered down the staircase and himself welcomed them in the tiny hall.

"This is topping," he cried, a little shyly but very cor-

dially. "My dear old chap. . . . How are you, Mrs. Heber?"

Heber looked extremely tall, and then extremely thin, after he had taken off his coat and muffler. His stoop had vanished. He stood stiffly erect, as though after a course of severe drilling. Mrs. Heber, clothed to the feet in rich fur and with a lace shawl round her neck, refused to take off anything.

"I'm afraid we're awfully early," she said, as she preceded Bird through the doorway of the drawing room.

"No, no. Can't be too early. The missis will be here in a moment."

"Our chauffeur miscalculated the distance."

"Yes, yes. Won't you sit down?"

But Mrs. Heber said she would prefer to stand for a little while because her feet felt slightly numb.

Then Amy came in; terribly shy, as Bird saw to his distress, and drawling much more than usual in her shyness. She at once asked Mrs. Heber to sit down and take off her wraps; and it all had to be gone through again. Mrs. Heber clung to her fur because of coldness and stood because of numbness.

"My wife," said Heber, in almost an apologetic tone, "has spent a good deal of her life in India."

"Yes," said Mrs. Heber, smiling graciously. And, after a glance at some of the furniture: "Have you been in India, Mrs. Bird?"

What house-decorators termed "cozy corners" were still popular among many people, and Amy, furnishing, had gone strongly for these ingenious arrangements. There was a large cozy corner in the drawing room and half of one in the dining room. For the rest, she had struck an oriental note; with palms in brass pots, pierced ebony screens, and Japanese silk embroidery hanging in

long narrow strips on the walls. Mrs. Heber was looking at a palm and a brass pot when she asked that last question.

"No, I've been nowhere," said Amy, drawling. "I'm afraid I'm a regular stay-at-home."

These minutes, while Bird was longing for the parlour-maid to appear at the door and say dinner was ready, proved very difficult. Heber, although seeming grand and lofty in aspect and manner, was suffering from the same sense of constraint that afflicted Bird. Only Mrs. Heber was quite at her ease.

"Cold, are you, Mrs. Heber? Too bad! What a shame. Wretched feeble grate this." Bird was now poking the coal fire with such hospitable vigour that he nearly put it out. "We must make a blaze for you, *somehow*."

"Oh, do take care," said Amy.

Then Mrs. Heber unrobed. Heber took the fur coat and lace shawl from her, and she stood before them in all her splendour. Bird turning and still grasping the poker was astounded.

He had already noticed the increased attractiveness of her wavy bronze-coloured hair, which she now wore parted in the middle and drawn back over her ears to a big roll behind her neck; but you did not get the full effect till you saw the bare neck and shoulders, the rows of pearls, and the gorgeous dress. And what had happened to her complexion that used to be so dull and earthy? After its year in Europe it was now pink and white. Her face with the aquiline nose and thin arched eyebrows seemed to be modelled in delicate porcelain. Above all, that air of well-bred refinement was now as it were lit up and made to shine refulgently by the glory of accessories. "*What* an improvement," thought Bird. "Devilish handsome woman. Tip-top style—no getting away from it."

And poor Amy, after considering what would be good form at so small a dinner-party, thinking that Mrs. Heber would come "in just anything" and anxious not to put the guest out of countenance by over-dressing, had decided for this plain satin skirt and moderately ornamental mauve blouse. She need not have had any qualms. She stood there, for a moment pouting but abashed, with nothing to oppose to such a dazzling apparition but her white skin, red hair, broad figure, and a chain of large amber beads. Honest Bird, however, turning to her after his staggered admiration of their visitor, thought she looked charming—so simple and sweet and girlish.

They went to dinner; and Amy talked to Heber and Bird talked to Mrs. Heber, but could not help listening to what the other two were saying.

Amy talked of the car. It was on her mind, she could not get away from it. She said that she and Birdie of course hadn't got a car; and Heber, as if trying to soften matters, said that it really wasn't his. He spoke of it lightly as their "hireling rattle-trap," explaining that it belonged to a man who had been a coachman. It was kept for him at the mews next door to them.

"We have a mews on one side of us," said Heber, smiling, "and a public house on the other, Mrs. Bird."

"Oh, but it's Mayfair all the same," said Amy, rather idiotically; and she returned to the subject of cars, saying that they managed to get on very well without a car although no doubt a car was a great convenience.

"We'll have one some day, Amy," said Bird, breaking into the conversation. "When our ship comes home, what? Willy, you must tell us all about 'em."

Then soon Amy broke into Mrs. Heber's conversation with Bird. Mrs. Heber was asking him if they had many pleasant neighbours.

"Too many," said Bird gaily. "Not always easy to keep em at arm's length. You know, awfully kind, friendly lot of people—and they make a tremendous fuss of Amy."

"Of course this is a very small house," said Amy, breaking in. "We can't attempt to do any entertaining on a large scale."

"No. Only tea-parties," said Bird in the same gay tone. "Tea-parties! That's the rule out here. I dodge them when Amy lets me"; and he laughed cheerily.

He made the best of things, not the worst; defending the little house that Amy had chosen herself and was truly very proud of—or at any rate had been proud of till now.

"It's semi-detached, Willy. You wouldn't notice that, driving up in the darkness. So we have plenty of air round us. And there's a jolly bit of garden at the back. I dig there, old boy—in my shirt sleeves, what! You should see me—the amateur gardener"; and again he laughed joyously.

He was determined to be happy and gay, and to make the others enjoy themselves too. Good gracious, why not? Amy had given them a ripping dinner, the waiting was excellent, the wine was A. 1. He hopped up from his chair to help the maidservants open another bottle of champagne or to fill a glass that was three quarters full already.

What was wrong? Why wouldn't the thing go off properly? It was not merely shyness that caused the increasingly apparent failure. It was more than this strange constraint between Bird and Heber, this burden of new reticences making them feel like two strangers who were merely acting at being friends, or two malefactors with a guilty secret that bound them together and yet separated them for ever. It was far more than all

this. Before the dinner was over Bird understood what he was up against. He knew, and he knew that Heber knew—their wives were not taking to each other, not hitting it off nicely, not getting heart close to heart.

Heber made a desperate effort at the time of the cutlets and chipped potatoes. He began telling anecdotes, incisively, one after another; and Amy laughed. If not quite enough, she laughed. Bird roared, in gratitude and hope. Mrs. Heber smiled with well-bred benignity, making no pretense of not having heard the tales before but seeming pleased to hear them again. Then, in the middle of the Heber flow, she touched Bird's arm with a slender forefinger and whispered to him. Hardly could one call it a whisper; it was the faintest possible articulation of words, almost without movement of her lips, but accompanied by a mysteriously significant glance of the eyes. The words reached Bird all right and he contrived to answer them. For two to three moments it was as if she and Bird were freemasons, or wireless operators, or telepathists, in communication by a process only available to the initiated.

"How do you think he is looking?" asked Mrs. Heber.

"Splendid," Bird replied gratifyingly. "Top-hole. Never saw him look so well."

"Really?"

"Honour bright. I think he looks ten years younger."

"So glad—so very glad you think so."

The exchanges ceased; and Bird flushed. He saw that Amy had detected the mysterious whispering. Amy did not like it.

Thence onward to the dessert Mrs. Heber did all the talking. As Bird remembered while listening to her, she was a great talker when once off the mark, and not easily to be checked by interruptions. If you said anything

she gave you a tired smile and went on without stopping. She talked now about the pleasures of travel, with special reference to her own extended continental tour with Heber, strongly counselling Amy and Bird to follow in their footsteps at the first opportunity. Naples, Rome, Genoa, Como, Baveno, St. Moritz, Tyrol—the names of places Amy had heard of often, the places Amy had never seen, came smoothly, trippingly, in a long geographical stream.

"No, I've not been there either," said Amy, trying to stop her none too politely. "Oh, I'm afraid my education has been badly neglected."

Mrs. Heber nearly stopped but not quite. She raised her thin eyebrows as if surprised by something odd in Amy's abrupt statement; then she gave a little well-bred laugh. "Hasn't the education of all of us been neglected, Mrs. Bird? But I do say that travelling, seeing the world——" And she went on again. "Yes, you must really get Mr. Bird to take you to Italy in the spring. Wilfred shall make out an itinerary . . ."

At the request of both Heber and Bird, the ladies remained at the table to drink their coffee and smoke a cigarette.

Nor did the men linger after they had finally gone. Heber did not even resume his seat, and Bird went fussing round with the decanters. A terrible discomfort had fallen upon them now that they were by themselves. They seemed unable even to look each other in the face. But they were exuberantly friendly on the surface although so wofully troubled in the deeps.

"No more port, Willy. . . . Not half a glass?"

"My dear old boy, I simply couldn't. I have already exceeded." And Heber tried to imitate Bird's laugh. "I feel as if I had been banqueting at the Mansion House."

"Oh, bosh. Ha-ha. Don't you pull my leg, Willy"; and Bird glanced at the door. "If you really won't drink, er, shall we——"

Heber finished the sentence for him. "Yes, shall we join the others?"

Their eyes met for a moment uncomfortably. It was almost as if they had expressed the thought in plain words: "Wouldn't it be wise for us to get back to the danger zone without delay?"

They sat then in the drawing room, the four of them, and it was far worse than before dinner.

After a considerable time Mrs. Heber brought from hidden folds of her lovely frock a gold cigarette case and toyed with it elegantly. Heber sprang up from his chair.

"Do you mind?" he said nervously. "Would you mind if Clarice smoked?"

It was the first time that he had spoken of her by her Christian name.

"Of course not," said Bird. "*Rather*"; and he looked at Amy.

"Oh, by all means," said Amy, almost rudely. Then, seeing the shocked and reproachful look on her husband's face, she added with meek politeness, "But please smoke one of ours. Birdie, fetch the silver box."

"Yes, yes," cried Bird, delighted, trotting away. "How stupid of me to have left it in the other room. We'll all smoke."

Mrs. Heber, however, preferred to smoke her own cigarettes, which were Russian and of a peculiar character. "Do try one, Mrs. Bird."

"No, thank you," said Amy, biting her lip.

Heber, like a soldier doing a part of his drill, produced a match box that was connected to his trouser pocket by a gold chain. He lit a match and held its flame to Mrs.

Heber's Russian cigarette. Then he solemnly crossed the room and put the stump of the match in the fender, as if he was afraid it might relight itself and set the house on fire.

Mrs. Heber smoked three of her cigarettes while Bird and Heber smoked two each from the silver box. And after that Mrs. Heber, who had become silent, murmured something about the passage of time and a lengthy visitation.

"Oh, good gracious, no," said Bird. "You mustn't dream of running away yet. I won't hear of it. Why, it's only a quarter past ten. The church clock struck the quarter just now. The church is close by, Willy—not a hundred yards. But you wouldn't notice it in the dark."

Nevertheless Mrs. Heber rose; and Heber, having brought the big fur coat and the lace shawl from the piano, on which they had been laid, Mrs. Heber robed herself. While doing so she murmured again—to the effect that she wondered if it would be too much trouble for somebody to go and see if the car was there.

"I'll go myself," said Amy. "No, please, I want to"; and she hurried from the room.

Directly Amy was gone Bird became aware of an astounding change in Mrs. Heber. Her manner, her very appearance seemed different. She was bright and gay, and most delightfully friendly. She filled the room with friendliness, and yet came and stood quite near to Bird as if to give him more of it. She talked with animation, smiling and moving her head; almost touching Bird with one hand while she linked the other in the arm of Heber and pulled him into the close group.

"When you are in London do come and look us up, Mr. Bird. Any time, you know. Drop in on Wilfred."

"Yes, I wish you would," said Heber, without looking at Bird.

"I want you to understand," said Mrs. Heber, in the most sprightly style, "that he is not tied to my apron strings. No, I believe in absolute liberty of the subject. And, of course, you two have heaps and heaps of things to talk about. Now why don't you make an appointment for golf? Give yourselves a long day together in the fresh air." Thus she talked to them, confidentially, charmingly. "Mr. Bird, he *must* have exercise. I tell him he ought to ride before breakfast. I wish you'd lecture him. Of course, no one knows him as well as you do"; and again she laughed—kindly, merrily, not at all as she had laughed during dinner. "One day I want to get you all to myself, Mr. Bird, and make you tell me a lot about his fads and fancies—these likes and dislikes, you know. Yes, you must give me a few hints as to how to manage him. I'm sure you found out long ago that, with all his numerous talents and virtues, he is a little *difficile*."

"Ha-ha, that's it," said the delighted Bird, laughing heartily. "Right nail on the head there, my dear Mrs. Willy. *Rem acu tetigisti*, what! He does need managing, doesn't he?" And in his immense satisfaction he restorted to an old trick, and made pretense to hit out at Heber's ribs with his clenched fist.

The wonder, the delight of it, was caused by Bird's recognition of the fact that Mrs. Heber's talk had nearly broken down the impalpable barriers between himself and his friend—not completely, but nearly. More than half the embarrassment had gone; the dead weight of their reserves and secret misgivings was amazingly lighter. Bird looked at Heber boldly while imitating assault and battery.

At first Heber had not appeared to enjoy his wife's chatter; his face expressed distaste, as if he suspected artificiality or even humbug; then he had frowned and smiled at the same time; and then his whole frame slowly relaxed. He ceased to stand erect; he stooped, he slouched just as he used to do.

"Don't encourage her nonsense," he said, smiling at Bird, and looking exactly as Bird had seen him look a thousand times in the old days.

They all three laughed then in the jolliest way imaginable. And Bird would have loved it except for a new discomfort. He felt he must not admit himself or allow others to infer that, although the four of them could not get along together, it was all easy going when there were only the three of them in assembly. He struggled against the establishment of any such tacit understanding by the friendly, confidential Clarice. He several times mentioned his wife's name, and kept glancing at the shut door.

Amy was a long while out of the room, and when she returned she said coldly, if not curtly, "Your chauffeur is finishing his supper. He'll be ready in a minute."

"Oh, by Jove, yes," said Bird. "Supper. *I* ought to have thought of that. Thank you so much, Amy dear."

"It's too kind of you," said Mrs. Heber. "But we're inflicting an awful amount of trouble. The man cannot really want food." Her manner had changed back to what it was earlier in the evening. She sat in a graceful attitude upon the arm of a chair, with the point of a gold-embroidered shoe peeping out from beneath her silks and furs, until the parlourmaid announced that both car and chauffeur were now in readiness at the front door.

Bird went out into the roadway with the guests to see them off, and he stood watching all the house fronts and tiny front gardens spring into vivid light and fall back

into darkness, one after another, as the glaring lamps of the car passed them. With a hoot and rattle it disappeared at the end of the road, and everything was dark and silent again.

When he returned to the house Amy was violently pulling up the blinds and opening the windows in the drawing room.

"She has poisoned the place," said Amy, "with her disgusting tobacco smoke. It will smell for a week. It's enough to make any one sick."

"Yes, I know you don't like smoking in the drawing room," said Bird deprecatingly. "But does it matter, just for once?"

Amy went upstairs without answering.

Twenty minutes later, before he undressed, he peeped into the bedroom, intending to say a few cheerful words and to thank her for that well-planned and well-cooked dinner. She was still fully dressed, but lying face downward on the bed in floods of tears.

"Oh, my dear girl. What is it? Oh dear, oh dear."

And he sat upon the bed, patted her back, tried to bring comfort and consolation.

"I hate her," sobbed Amy. "I hate her. Why does she come here trying to spoil everything—swaggering with her pearls and her motor-car—patronizing me, insulting me?"

Bird was beginning to protest when Amy sat up suddenly and had an outburst of furious indignation.

"What the devil does she mean by treating me as if I was dirt? And why do you let her do it? Coming into the drawing room in her overcoat—putting her hateful things on the piano—lolling on the arm of a chair—not caring if she breaks it. I wish it *had* broken and let her down"; and the anger blowing itself out, Amy clung to

her husband as if despairingly. "You admire her, I suppose? Oh, Birdie, be loyal to me. Don't let people come into the house and trample on me. I can't stand it. It'll break my heart." And the anger returned, supplemented now with scorn. "Let her pull in her waist and paint her lips as she pleases, she's a *horrid* woman. All of her that isn't sham and pretense is just wickedness. Besides, don't you run away with the idea that she's fond of Mr. Heber. She doesn't care *that* for him"; and Amy endeavoured to snap her fingers. "Every little bit of it is sham."

Then there were more tears. They sat side by side on the bed now, Bird holding her in his arms, and her head drooping more and more settled itself against his shirt front; so that he could see nothing but the red hair, the white neck, and the amber beads of that poor little necklace.

"Birdie," she murmured piteously, "you know how I love you—and my love makes me so helpless, so utterly at your mercy. Don't be cruel to me."

Whenever he heard this particular kind of appeal—and already he had heard it rather often—it tore Bird's heart.

"My darling Amy," he muttered wretchedly, "how can you say these things? You know that I——"

"Then promise you won't ever let her get you in her toils. Promise you won't have anything to do with her that I don't know about."

Bird of course promised.

"And you swear you won't force me to cringe to her and bow down before her?"

Bird then succeeded in temporarily consoling her. He said that they need not bother themselves about Mrs. Heber; for Mrs. Heber was of absolutely no consequence

or importance, except when considered from one standpoint. She was married to Mr. Heber. They must therefore treat her with courtesy and not offend her.

"You see, Amy, W. H. and I are such very old friends. He's quite the oldest friend I've got. In a sense he's the only friend I *have* got. So even if we don't *like* Mrs. Willy, we really must put up with her. I couldn't wound his feelings—I wouldn't do it. I can't tell you what pleasure it was to see the old chap again after such a long time—to have him here under one's roof, you know."

Amy seemed about to burst into fresh sobs.

"Say you don't care for him more than you do for me."

"Oh, what nonsense—what utter rot," said Bird testily, almost losing his temper. "Where's the sense of such rubbish? How can you make such an absurd comparison? My feelings for an old pal and my feelings for you are two totally different things—wide as the poles asunder. They don't clash because they *can't* clash. . . . There, there, my dear"; and again he became gentle and soothing.

CHAPTER XII

THUS life went on, not too easily for one of the partners in the firm. While feeling as if he really had nothing to do, Bird was kept busy and given very little leisure for his own use. His affectionate Amy liked to have her husband with her, and as she was unable to share in his amusements he had to take part in hers. To his great disappointment she refused to learn golf and even spoke with contempt of a game that had seemed to attract if not to fascinate her at first acquaintance. Another disappointment was her failure in walking. He had fancied that she was quite a good walker, but he found that what she called a walk was only a saunter round the suburb. And even for this she kept him waiting. If she said they would start directly after luncheon, it was past three, nearly four o'clock sometimes, before she came downstairs dressed and ready.

Then they strolled away, to the end of their road, along other roads similar to it, and debouched upon the place locally known as the Common—an enclosure of arid grass surrounded by the shops at which Amy purchased articles both of necessity and luxury. She had no particular hour for her shopping; she did not tackle it and be done with it. She shopped as much in the afternoon as in the morning, and between tea and dinner often shopped again by telephone from her own fireside.

"One moment, Birdie. I want to go in here to get a bottle of bath salts, and I'll see if they've got a new

novel that's worth reading. Come in with me. Then it won't seem so long."

Bird begged her not to hurry, and stood outside the shop windows considering the suburban scene. He did not like Beaver's Hill. To a country-bred man who loved London, the suburbs had no charm. "They don't seem to be one thing or the other," he said to himself pathetically.

And all these suburban people, these innumerable friends buckled to them by Amy, appeared vapid, colourless, with no more salient features than the neighbourhood itself possessed. He had the greatest difficulty in learning to know one of them from another, and he muddled all their names hopelessly. They always met some of them at or about the Common. It was a sort of social exchange as well as a shopping centre.

"Take off your hat," Amy used to say. "That's Miss Muchison, bowing to us. . . . Ah, you were too late."

"Sorry I didn't twig her quicker."

"Here's Mr. Sims coming. . . . No, he's turned into the Avenue."

"Sims, yes, to be sure. Capital fellow, Sims. Not too much Roman collar, what!"

Mr. Sims was one of the curates at St. Mark's, their own church.

Then, perhaps, coming out of the greengrocer's or the butcher's, Amy took her husband's breath away by unexpected news.

"To-day's the Wheelers' At Home, and it's half-past four now."

"Oh! Have you walked enough? Shall I put you into a cab and send you there in style?"

"Well, a cab would be very nice," said Amy, pleased. "But of course you're coming with me."

"No—if you don't mind. Let me off this, my dear."

He pleaded in vain. She took him to the Wheelers', the Prices', or whatever the name might be; and while he handed the tea-cups, he said to himself, "Dashed lot of old tabbies. It isn't fair to stuff me in here among such a dashed lot of old tabbies."

When it was over and they reached the open air again Amy took his arm and pressed against him and said affectionately, "You know I love having you with me."

She was fond of him. He never doubted this; and because of it he always yielded in the end, no matter how distasteful the task to which she condemned him. They were man and wife—wonderful words, in the light of his new comprehension of their meaning. "I'll ask my wife. My wife was saying yesterday. . . ." It was still pleasant thus to speak of her; it filled him with sensations of importance, grandeur, responsibility; it lifted him above the unromantic ruck of mere bachelors. They might in their blank ignorance think there was nothing much to discover in the married state; but he knew. Only married men can know.

For marriage transcended Bird's wildest imaginings of what it might be like. The intimacy of the relationship overwhelmed him. No confidential disclosures in his previous intercourse with men had prepared him for this rending of the last veils, this unintermitted presentment of the spiritual self naked and unashamed, this blurting out from minute to minute of every thought or fancy that happens to come into the mind. Yet Mrs. Fawcett had said that Amy was reticent, even secretive! She kept nothing back from Bird; she made a clean breast of it. Perhaps she had been waiting through the years for this expansive revelation to the loved object.

She submerged him with a thousand details of her do-

mestic existence—the gnat-bite on her white, smooth fore-arm, the hole in her stocking, the leak in her hot-water bottle, the embroidered monogram on her undermost under-garment, the mysterious internal pain after eating lobster, her occasional headaches and the recurrent need for certain medicines; she enveloped him in clouds of steam from her hot baths; she filled his nostrils and made his head swim with the mingled perfume of her experimental bath salts and her long-used favourite hair-lotion. She flowed over him with her physical attributes, her personal cares, and hopes, and fears, her sheer elemental femininity. He was like an island in the mouth of an immense river; and the river, the narrow sea beyond the river's mouth, the wide ocean beyond that, were simply Amy. When the pressure began, when the force of the tide set his way, he slowly went under.

The house was called theirs, but it was hers really. Her atmosphere filled it; although she sat in one room, she seemed to be sitting in all the rooms. He had not two cubic feet of it that was his own—not even in his half of that broad bed upstairs, not even in this little room on the ground floor that she spoke of as his den, and that he had tried to make neat and shipshape with the assistance of Mr. Green, the carpenter. She overflowed on both floors. Things that were put into the den to get them out of the way when she gave one of her tea-parties never seemed to go out again. That sewing-machine was here for ever, because a sewing-machine is unsightly in a reception room.

If he went into the garden she overflowed there also. He could hear her voice as she talked to the servants, or she called to him from an upper window.

And then, of course, there was her family too. He could not trust himself to think of her family, and when

forced to speak of them he had certain set phrases that he always repeated. "Oh, I know your mother is well-meaning, my dear. . . . Your brother asks for impossibilities, but I know he does not realize it. . . . Your uncle, as you say yourself, is deficient in tact, but I'm sure he has a kind heart."

Another thing with regard to which marriage in its reality surpassed all anticipatory estimates or conjectures was the expense of it. Although they were living so simply, they seemed to be spending an enormous amount of money; yet—and this bothered Bird greatly—Amy was never satisfied in the results achieved by their expenditure. She was grateful, but she showed always that she wanted more, while making every excuse for his inability to provide it. She made a poor mouth. She said, "I know how generous and ungrudging you are. Don't think for a moment that I was hinting anything unkind. I was only thinking of the things we might do if you were better off. Oh, I realize thoroughly that one has to cut one's coat according to one's cloth." This wounded Bird's pride, for he thought that, all things considered, he had cut a fair-sized coat for her, and of a handsome material.

Naturally little tiffs and quarrels are unavoidable in marriage, but he hoped that he and Amy did not have more of them than any other happy couple. He tried to avoid them by giving way as much as possible.

The few times when he stood firm, and tried to fight the thing out, were only when he felt in danger of being obliterated intellectually, as well as submerged physically. Struggling to retain his original sense of right and wrong, he refused to do what appeared to be palpably improper —such as lending money to relations by marriage who did not deserve it; putting money in rash speculations to

further the interests of these same people; proposing one of them as member of a respected and admired London club, where the candidate's company could not possibly be desired. "No, Amy, one must be just before one is generous. . . . I hate thwarting any wish of yours, but really it must be 'no' this time. . . . Very sorry, my dear, but I must ask you to let that idea be a wash-out. . . . Yes, I really must put my foot down here." Then came the distressing tussle between two will powers temporarily in opposition. Amy pouted, and sullenly left the room. Bird went out into the garden, snatched his spade, and dug the flower border strenuously; letting off steam to the accomplishment of a silent monologue. "There *are* limits. This is beyond a joke. It's not fair. I have done all I could—goodness knows that I've done all I could for her." Then, perhaps, wiping away the perspiration that had been induced by exercise and emotion, he returned to the house, and Amy would not speak to him.

This made him angry.

"Oh, sent to Coventry, what? Very funny—I don't think. But two can play at that, my dear. I'll take the liberty of wishing you good-morning. You'll see me again when you do, don't you know."

And he went to London swelling with indignation, and intending to spend the rest of the day at his club.

But he could not really enjoy himself. Tenderness resumed its sway over him. Yet never had the club been more attractive, or his club mates more friendly. Driving away haunting images of home and Amy, he threw himself into an orgy of Snooker-Pool that began just after tea and would last till dinner time. He, of course, was going to stay to dinner. But he did not distinguish himself at Snooker—his touch was feeble, his aim

vacillating. Those visions returned; the picture of Amy fretting in solitude grew more and more piteous—"Man and wife. . . . To have and to hold. . . . For better, for worse."

He looked at the clock. Ten minutes to seven. If he dashed off now, he could get home in time for dinner. He could save Amy from the wretchedness of a solitary meal. He made his excuses and departed, amidst the reproaches of his friends, murmuring with affected jovialness, "My wife expects me; daren't stay without a ticket of leave."

"Oh, yes," said somebody. "I forgot. Bird has taken to himself a wife. Gave a dinner here to celebrate the event, and never asked me." And they laughed and chaffed in friendly fashion. Somebody else said—"Yes, Bird is very much married." Bird did not like that turn of phrase, but he could not stay to reprove the speaker. He reached home just before eight o'clock; but all was dark in the little hall, and he thought at once—"What a sell! Amy's gone out to spend the evening with some of her friends." He turned on the electric light, rang the bell for Gladys, the parlourmaid. Gladys told him that Mrs. Bird was not out. She had gone to bed.

"Oh, I hope she's not ill."

Gladys said not ill, but she feared that Mrs. Bird was rather poorly.

Bird hastened upstairs, and entered the darkened room on tiptoe. He switched on one of the electric lamps, and stood by the bed, looking down at his wife solicitously. She lay quite still; but she was not asleep, she was quietly weeping. He stooped over her, kissing her cold, wet face; then he took her in his arms, and she felt small, weak, limp.

"Oh, why are you so unkind to me?" she said at last. "Why did you marry me at all, if you meant to be so cruel?"

"But I'm not cruel."

"You *are* cruel—dreadfully cruel. Sometimes I think I shall kill myself." And her tears fell fast.

"My dear child, do you mean you've been fretting like this all this time because, for good solid reasons, I refused to do what you asked?"

"Of course I have"; and the tears fell on his hand, on his shirt cuff, and half way up his sleeve.

"Well, well. Really. I must think it over again. I must see what can be done."

He gave in. The tears always beat him.

Amy sat up in bed to thank him. Her limpness passed off; she hugged him firmly while she dried her eyes on his shoulder.

"I do so love you," she gasped, still sobbing. "That's why I simply can't bear it when you're harsh and stern to me. . . . But you haven't had any dinner, Birdie darling. Go down and tell them to cook you a chop. There's one in the house."

She was fond of him. That is the essential thing that husbands look for in their wives, and when they get it they should pardon or ignore a great deal else. But out of Amy's fondness there came a colossal trouble. It was small at first; it seemed no more than what one might describe as the correlative defect of a quality; but it was destined to grow big enough almost to drive Bird crazy. This was Amy's jealousy.

In the beginning he had been so foolish as to trifle with the menace. He had felt pleasantly flattered by it in its early manifestations, during their brief engagement, the honeymoon, and the settling-down at the villa. He smiled fatuously and wriggled complacently when she said she saw his eye rove, or reported that total strangers of the

other sex had glanced at him admiringly and invitingly.

"My dear Amy," he said, "I don't believe that the good lady was aware of my existence. As to the other thing"; and he paused, so much gratified by the accusation he was rebutting that he smirked and tittered stupidly. "Well, I do wish you'd disabuse your mind of the notion that I am that sort of fellow."

Then, later, came another retrospective denunciation of Evelyn, *née* Glover, now Mrs. Richard Palgrave, and some ugly hints concerning Miss Daphne Yates. He met these seriously, yet still with insufficient understanding of his danger.

The first sharp taste of what lay in store was given to him on the afternoon that they dined with Mr. and Mrs. Heber in Mayfair. During the weeks that had elapsed since their own dinner-party he had made no effort to see Wilfred again; but now when Mrs. Heber wrote to Amy asking them to come and meet a few friends at dinner, he was elated by the prospect of refreshing his eyes with another glimpse of W. H. and happily surprised by the readiness with which Amy agreed to go. Amy seemed willing now to believe that she had been wrong in condemning Mrs. Heber so severely; at any rate, Mrs. Heber ought to be given another chance; and there was something mollifying in being bidden to meet other guests. It proved that Mrs. Heber, in spite of all her airs and graces, did not consider Amy unworthy of presentation to her grand friends.

On that afternoon Amy had an interview with a housemaid, a cousin of Gladys their parlourmaid. Gladys wished her to replace the housemaid who was leaving them. Gladys, it should be mentioned, was a nice, clean, obliging young woman but far from beautiful; and, perhaps con-

scious of this slight defect, she declared that cousin Emily was good-looking, and would look extremely well when helping to wait at table.

After a time Bird was summoned by Amy, who told him that she intended to engage the girl and he need only ask a few questions in order to confirm her own favourable judgment.

"Well, now—Emily. That's your name—I'm given to understand," said Bird genially.

"Yes, sir."

"A very nice name, too"; and he looked at her kindly, while Amy looked from one to the other with increasing attention.

"Leaving your present situation at your own wish—Mrs. Bird tells me?"

"Yes, sir."

She had been sitting in a somewhat dejected attitude, but now she became more alive and answered brightly. In fact, she was enchanted with Bird. The genial tone of his voice, his good-humoured smile, his *jolliness,* combined to make him appear an ideal employer. Amy, watching, bit her lip.

"Hope you're not afraid of work, Emily," said Bird, concluding his interrogations. "Work's good for everybody. You'll see me hard at it, in the garden—with my coat off, you know. And that's how we like to see everybody—metaphorically, if you follow me—with their coats off."

"Yes, sir"; and Emily laughed contentedly.

Amy took Bird out of the room and asked him what he thought of her.

"I think she's A. 1.," said Bird, with innocent satisfaction. "Fix it up with her *tooty sweety.*"

This expression, a travesty of a French phrase that

implied avoidance of delay, was a well-known facetiousness of his, and Amy knew that he employed it in moments of pleasure.

"You seem very anxious," said Amy, as she examined his face searchingly. "Is it because you think her pretty?"

"No, because she seems so *nice*—speaks so nicely. And she *is* pretty, too. I consider Gladys quite justified in what she said of her."

"All right," said Amy, going back to the other room.

But it was all wrong, really—as Bird discovered at tea. Amy had not engaged the girl; she had paid the girl's expenses and made an excuse. She said nothing would induce her to have the girl in her house; and when the amazed Bird asked why, she flared and blazed.

"You know very well why," she said hotly and fiercely. "Oh, I'm not blind. Don't suppose I didn't notice the way you looked at her—and the way she looked at you."

Then Bird exploded in his turn.

"Did you state your reason to Gladys? Answer me. . . . Listen to me. Do you hear? I won't have it." He was very angry indeed. "I'll not be dragged down to such—to such depths of contempt. I'll not consent to be made ridiculous. . . ."

It was a painful tiff. And yet, miraculously—impossibly, if it had occurred under any other condition than those of married life—it was all over in less than half an hour. By the end of their tea it was almost as if it had never been. They made things up and embraced. Amy, for her part, had been soothed and rejoiced by Bird's violent wrath—because it was so obviously wrath, so unmistakably not guilt. And Bird was left with only a slight, deep-seated soreness, which melted and disappeared while he was dressing for the dinner. He had then recol-

lected very appositely a poetical quotation, and the music of the words as well as the meaning softened him and at the same time braced him—"Yes, we fell out, my wife and I, and kissed again with tears."

They started on their journey the best of friends; and in the first-class carriage of the District Railway he felt very proud of her sitting there by his side with a beautiful mauve velvet cloak, an ermine stole, and a wreath of silver ivy leaves tied round her red hair. They had been uneasy lest they should arrive late; but at Victoria they secured a four-wheeled cab with a horse so strong and swift that when it whisked them into Berkeley Square they thought they were too early. At Amy's request Bird leaned out of the window and told the cabman to drive round and round the square before proceeding farther.

"Can this be Colwyn Street?" she cried, after the journey had been resumed. "Oh, it *is* a nasty, horrid little street"; and there was something of relief and satisfaction in her tone.

"Yes, here we are. Here's the public-house"; and Bird leaned out of the window again. "That door, cabby. . . . Hi! Pull up."

"I do hope it won't be a really big fashionable party," said Amy nervously, as she alighted.

The house was quite small, and yet, to Amy, magnificent and awe-inspiring. Of the Georgian period, with white stone and black marble to walk upon, with a column or two, with dark walls and a few dim old pictures, it had that air of being some lesser, out-of-the-way corner of a palace which cannot possibly be attained, try how you will, in a modern, cheaply built suburban villa. A young butler with an excessively young footman to aid him took respectful possession of Bird, and Amy

was wafted away to a noble library at the back of the house, where Mrs. Heber's own maid, capless, wearing a black silk apron, was waiting for her with powder puff and other refined little comforts.

She looked defiantly careworn, because of her nervousness, when she rejoined her husband, but she swept past him and up the panelled staircase grandly. On the landing, where you could hear all the voices, there was embarrassment for a moment. The butler, after laying his fingers on the handle of a door, stood looking at her questioningly. Then he made a faint murmur. It was only a momentary pause, for Amy at once recovered her presence of mind.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carrington Bird," she said drawlingly but firmly.

The butler opened the door, went into the room, and repeated her words.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carrington Bird."

After all, they had arrived late. The party—which comprised two youths nearly as young as the footman, two bare-shouldered youngish women, a stout elderly lady with gray hair, and an elderly gentleman to balance her—was already assembled, and Bird saw Wilfred ring the bell as a signal for the announcement of dinner while Mrs. Heber was coming forward to welcome them. Once again her manner had changed. Throughout the evening she was friendly to Amy; and Amy, warming under the new treatment, soon became quite at ease—perhaps a shade too much so.

She was enjoying herself. It there was artificialness in the consideration shown to her by her hostess, the attentive kindness of her host was delightfully genuine. With an affectionate glow Bird observed Wilfred's devoted solicitude. It was courtly, charming, chivalrous.

No, that last was a wrong word. Chivalrous! With a twinge of pain Bird wondered why the word had occurred to him: really understanding why, but trying not to understand. Gradually these other women had dropped away from Amy; they refused to take to her; they grew shy and cold with her. Toward the end of it all, she was seated alone with Heber, who was assiduously showing her photographs that had been collected on the famous continental tour; and at something that she said, one of these young women laughed, exchanging a rapid, significant glance with the other one. Bird saw; and he believed that a white-waistcoated oaf sniggered and made a wry face, because he saw Mrs. Heber hit him reprovingly on the arm with her fan.

Bird for a moment glared, then feeling sore all over, joined his wife and Wilfred.

She spoke of her enjoyment during the homeward journey in the District Railway, and presently leaning against him fell asleep on his shoulder. Over her wreathed head he looked out at the darkness, thinking uncomfortably and distressfully. "Good gracious, what next? What fault can the stuck-up fools find with her? Amy is good enough for any company in the land. If I had brought her family along with her, it might have been another story. Her mother, I admit—her brother, too —in fact, the entire gang! But Amy!"

Very gently he put his arm round her lest she should slide in her sleep. He felt an immense tenderness for her; he wanted to protect her, to fight her battles, to sit heavily upon snobbish artificial ladies and knock the heads off the shoulders of grinning young apes in white waistcoats. He hated Mrs. Heber now, as much as Amy had done previously. There seemed to be nobody in the world that he could think of without annoyance and in-

dignation except dear old W. H. And there was pain even in the thought of him, because his chivalry had been needed.

Thus life went on, becoming more difficult for Bird every month except in one respect. He now frequently saw Heber. On several fine winter days they played golf together at Skeffington Park, Bird going there by train and being driven back to London in Heber's car. After the day's sport they had long talks together at Bird's club or in Heber's splendid but comfortable library. Mrs. Heber encouraged a renewal of their companionship; and Amy raised no objection, since Bird indulged himself thus only when he was "off duty," as he mentally described it—for instance, when his wife had family engagements that would fill the day, or best of all when she went to stay with her mother at Surbiton.

Mrs. Heber had said that she did not wish to tie Wilfred to her apron strings, and Bird now saw that this was true. Indeed she seemed well able to amuse herself. It was at this time that he first noticed some rather odd characteristics in Mrs. Heber. She displayed a very marked taste for youthful society and seemed to surround herself habitually with boys like those who had worn white waistcoats at the dinner-party. Bird when he encountered them suppressed a snort and became stiff and dignified, because he was never sure whether he had before him the one who had sniggered offensively. That these juvenile friends admired Mrs. Heber was obvious; almost one might say she had enslaved them, for she made them do just what she pleased; so to speak, she had strung them instead of Heber. She spoke of them as though they belonged to her, saying, "I'll tell Reggie to call at Todd's for the tickets," or "I have telephoned to Dolly telling

him to bring a piano-tuner." And Bird, noticing and meditating, thought, "Boys always do get silly about attractive women nearly old enough to be their mother, and I suppose she learned the trick of turning their silliness to account when she was in India. Out there no doubt she had a pack of young subalterns and what not following her about and running errands for her."

Heber himself once alluded to this matter in the presence of his wife. When she had said that she was going to a music-hall with Reggie, or that Dolly would escort her to the private view of some pictures and leave Wilfred free, he said, with a peculiar Heberish smile, "I call Clarice the baby-snatcher. She has no remorse with these children of hers."

Her real children came home for the Easter holidays, and their stepfather and Bird together took them out for a few treats—to the Zoo, to Madame Tussaud's, and Maskelyne & Cook's. The little boy Tony had lost his mop of flaxen hair. His small round head was close-cropped, he wore a suit of sailor's clothes, and Bird's heart was touched by the thought that such a mite as this had been sent to a boarding school. Also there seemed to be something of sadness and forlornness in Janet's unblinking stare. "I would have them here always," said Heber apologetically, as if reading Bird's thoughts; "but Clarice thinks they are better away." Evidently he was very kind to them and they both liked him.

Bird gave Tony a clock-work train with many lengths of rail and a splendid lot of accessories, and helped him to play with the toy in the library after tea. Heber helped Bird to help Tony at the game. They made the big writing table their treminus and called it Euston; they arranged the signal masts, level crossings, and bridges in the most realistic style; they became so much

interested in the game that Tony was gradually crowded out of it. "Now then, Willy," cried Bird, "stop her before she runs off the line"—Both of them were on the floor, Bird by the table and Heber kneeling far off near the coal-scuttle. "I've given an extra turn of the key. Now then. Take your seats, take your seats. First stop Crewe." Blowing into his clasped hands, Bird produced a realistic engine whistle, and the train came from under the writing table and dashed away on its long journey. "There! What did you think of that, Tony, my lad?"

But Tony had been crowded out. He was playing with a box of matches, in a corner of the room where Janet sat reading a book.

The two men rose from the floor, dusted the knees of their trousers, and laughed.

"Come on, my dears," cried Bird cheerily, "and we'll play at something else. Janet! *Your* turn! What shall it be? How, When, and Where? Or *cards?* Grab—What!"

When Clarice came to the library she always sent the children to bed.

"Yes, bed-time. You needn't stare, Janet. You have heard the word before. Bed-time!" And when they had gone, she said: "You spoil them, Mr. Bird. You're too good. But you mustn't let them bother you."

Then she assumed a graceful attitude, reclining on the arm of a chair or half sitting on the edge of the big table, and talked without stopping.

"Has he told you that I have coaxed him to take up his literary work again? It is such a gift, and it's really wicked to neglect it. Don't you agree with me? Yes, I am sure you do. He cannot for ever hide his light under a bushel, can he? And with his energetic mind he must

have occupation. I want him to write things for the quarterly reviews as well as going on with the 'Life.' You know all about the 'Life'—the 'Life of Robespierre'—don't you? But, of course, you do. What a question to ask!" And she smiled. "I often say, you know a great deal more about him than I do. You know everything. Well, he must get on with the 'Life.' This room is very quiet. There is no sound of the traffic. Janet and Tony know that they are not allowed to enter the room unless they have his special invitation. I have told the servants not to disturb him. For literary work one must have silence and solitude."

Bird, not called upon to talk too, or even to answer questions, thought of old Willy "pegging away" all by himself in these charming surroundings. Just now, while organizing Euston under the table, he had bumped against two of those well-known tin boxes that contained the paternal manuscripts and materials. Perhaps Willy would finish the "Life." If he couldn't break the back of the job here, he never would.

Truly this library, Willy's "den," made a remarkable contrast with Bird's overflowed retreat at Beaver's Hill; but it was without the faintest enviousness that he observed and admired its furniture and arrangement. He was glad to see the old chap so comfortably installed. He rejoiced to think that he had a fair chance of exercising his talents undisturbed.

Mrs. Heber went on talking until she was interrupted by the entrance of the butler, who announced that a young friend of hers was "on the telephone."

"Mr. Reginald Baldwin's compliments, ma'am, and can you dine with him at the Ritz Hotel and go on to Mrs. Llewellyn's box at the Palace Theatre?"

"Tell him to hold on," said Mrs. Heber.

There was a telephone instrument on Wilfred's table, and the butler inquired if he should connect it with the one in the hall so that she might speak to her young admirer without moving.

"No," she said; and turning to her husband, she asked, "What shall I do?"

"What shall you do? How do you mean?"

"I mean, shall I go or not?"

Heber, sitting low in an easy chair, with the finger tips of each bony hand touching the other, answered cynically: "If I were in your place, Clarice, I should consult my own inclinations, and go or not just as I pleased."

Mrs. Heber, with a soft laugh and a gesture, looked at Bird, seeming to say to him: "This is what I have to put up with. Isn't he incorrigible? *You* know his ways, of course." And turned again to her husband. "But, seriously, Wilfred, if you have any plans for the evening——"

Heber said he had no plans.

So then she went off to the telephone in the hall to talk to Reggie, and, returning soon, she told them that she had decided to go.

Heber, sunk lower still in the chair, said he felt certain it was a sound decision.

"Yes, that's all very well for *me*," said Mrs. Heber, standing behind her husband's chair and gently resting her hand on his shoulder. "But what about *you?* Can't you persuade Mr. Bird to stay and keep you company?"

"I wish you would," said Heber; and Bird was almost startled by the sudden genuineness of his tone as contrasted with the artificiality of the preceding talk.

"Oh, I'm afraid—— I, well—perhaps for this once," said Bird.

"That's sweet of you," said Mrs. Heber; and she

lingered for a little while in the same position behind the chair, speaking to Wilfred playfully and affectionately. Her hand remained upon his shoulder, seeming to caress it. "You're an ogre," she murmured fondly. "That's what you are—an *ogre!*"

Heber was smiling queerly. He raised his hand, took hers, and seemed to squeeze it.

"Thank you, Clarice," he said. "Now run away and be happy."

Bird, watching, wondered and felt baffled. Was she really fond of him, or was it all sham and pretense as Amy believed? Was Heber really fond of her? Did he enjoy all this playfulness, or did he merely submit because he couldn't help himself? Bird was unable to penetrate their secret.

He felt that he was up against another of the mysteries of married life, and that in a moment he had taken a long step forward in the process that changes an ordinary man into a philosopher. He understood then that you never can tell how things are really going with any married couple except yourself and your wife. Your dearest friends will baffle you as completely in this respect as will two unknown people that you may encounter on the top of an omnibus. Your friends Mr. and Mrs. A——, who seem to adore each other, open your eyes by the newspaper report of their divorce proceedings. Your friends Mr. and Mrs. B——, who seem to avoid, to scorn, to detest each other, who carry on as if only from day to day with disunion lurking in every to-morrow, eventually give a party to celebrate their golden wedding.

Bird's own feelings toward Clarice Heber had undergone various modifications. He was sure that he did not like her, but his hatred of her had been very brief. She had appeased him by her kind messages to Amy. She

spoke of Amy in the most friendly way; saying that she wanted to motor down to see her and was only waiting for a fine day to give herself this pleasure. She frequently inquired about Mrs. Bird's health, hoping that the winter had not tried it. She also said at intervals that she must persuade Amy to come and dine with them again.

But by the time the summer was fairly well advanced Amy grew restive under these distant civilities; she sulked when Bird confessed to another quiet evening passed in Heber's library; she wished to know how long he proposed to keep on terms of close intimacy with people who ignored his wife in the most insulting fashion.

"It may please them to ignore my existence," said Amy, with incipient heat; "but it's not very loyal of you to let them."

"Oh," said Bird feebly, "I assure you that you're quite wrong."

And it was on this that he felt compelled to drop a hint to Heber. Anything round-about was alien to the nature of Bird; he could not do hint-dropping delicately and neatly with anybody, least of all with Heber; so that, after a few conversational staggers, he as it were let the hint fall with a crash more shattering than would have been caused by a violently direct statement. The result of his earthquake innuendo was a coldly formal note from Mrs. Heber inviting Mr. and Mrs. Bird to dinner three weeks hence.

Amy cheered up at once. Mrs. Heber's formality gratified her, it seemed deferential, and she said that evidently the dinner was going to be a grand affair.

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," said Bird. "I don't think they give big parties."

"Of course they do," said Amy. "Only they've taken precious good care to keep them dark and not let us hear

about them. But now we are to be admitted to the august circle"; and she tried to toss her head scornfully, although she was really very much pleased. What else could such a long notice mean? Three weeks!

Having full time at her disposal, she bought a really gorgeous new dress for the occasion, and when the night came—a cold June night with scuds of fierce rain—she was almost too splendid at the Beaver's Hill railway station. In the train she spoke of the Hebers' wealth and the convenience of motor-cars. On such a night, when one wanted to look one's best and not arrive at the goal exhausted and dishevelled, one could not help thinking of how easy things are made for rich fashionable people.

The butler did not pause to-night on the landing. He opened the door and announced them without hesitation.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carrington Bird."

There was nobody in the room but the hosts, and Mrs. Heber told them almost immediately that nobody else was expected. As they entered she was crouching gracefully in the warmth of a wood-fire; and when she rose one saw that she was attired with fantastic simplicity. She wore an absolutely plain peignoir or dressing-wrap of a sea-green colour, a sack-like garment all loose and straight; she had not a single ornament; and some new arrangement of her bronze hair that brought it low and rigid across her forehead made her look like a personage of an ancient, half-forgotten civilization. There was, too, something of the sacrificial victim in her aspect. She might have been an Egyptian priestess, discovered in evil deeds, and garbed thus for her terrible punishment—and Heber, dark, solemn, mysterious, might have been the executioner, about to burn her alive, or beginning to roast her at a slow fire, when the visitors interrupted him. All this was in Bird's mind during his shock of surprise and while he

noticed that because of contrastive effects Amy in her newly purchased magnificence appeared to be ridiculously overdressed.

"Yes, only ourselves," Mrs. Heber was saying as she shook hands. "It's such a long time since we've seen you, Mrs. Bird; and now that we have persuaded you to come, I felt it would be so much nicer to have a cozy talk all alone."

"Oh, yes, very nice indeed," said Mrs. Bird, looking as if about to burst into tears of mortification and frightening Bird dreadfully.

"Yes, that was my idea," said Mrs. Heber.

"Quite—a—remarkably—charming—idea," said Amy, with so slow a drawl that the short sentence seemed interminable.

"Yes, yes," said Bird. "Much jollier. Pleasant surprise."

Heber, who had gone to the chimneypiece, turned abruptly.

"But you knew it was to be only us four, didn't you, Birdie?" And his face became lined and haggard as he looked at his wife. "Clarice, you said so, in your letter, didn't you?"

"Ring the bell," said Clarice, without answering. "What a lovely frock, Mrs. Bird. Oh, I do so admire it —and very becoming, if I may venture to say so."

"Rather. Why not?" said Bird, in a hurried, flustered way. "Isn't it topping? I told her it was. So glad you bear me out."

He knew that he was on the edge of a precipice, and all through dinner he felt that the ground was slipping from under his feet. The actual catastrophe occurred at a quarter past nine, a few minutes after they had got upstairs again.

It was dreadful. As he learned soon, Amy said that Mrs. Heber had "yawned in her face," but Bird only knew at the moment that the hostess was supposed to have said or done something rude; and it seemed to him that, however rude Mrs. Heber had been, Amy was being ruder still. Finally Amy said she was going. She ordered Bird to fetch her a cab; and then, for perhaps a minute, she and Bird were near the opened door expostulating with each other while Heber and Clarice expostulated together on the far side of the room near the curtained windows. Then Heber came forward apologizing and trying to drag his wife with him. But nothing could be of the least use. Amy was mortally offended and nothing could change her determination to be gone.

Heber stood with her in the hall, and continued to express his poignant regret at this early breaking up of a happy evening until the footman's shrill whistles brought a four-wheeled cab to the front door.

After she had safely entered the cab, Bird, who was in the greatest possible confusion and distress, ran back to the hall and ran out again. Then at last they were driving away, and Amy, half sobbing, half shouting, poured her complaints into his ear.

"If you went back to say anything polite to him," she cried furiously, "I'll never forgive you. Oh, if you dared to say you were sorry it *is* the end, and I'll kill myself."

"I didn't say I was sorry. I didn't say I was glad," shouted Bird, in a frenzy. "I don't understand what's up. I never saw anything like it."

"Oh, be loyal to me, Birdie. Swear you'll be loyal—swear you'll take my side, not their side."

"Of course I sha'n't. But what are the sides? What is it?"

"You saw—you must have seen. You heard—you must

have heard. Oh, thank heaven, I gave her a piece of my mind that she'll remember"; and Amy began to weep hysterically.

Birdie stopped the cab, and leaning out of the window spoke to the driver. Plainly that homeward journey by the District Railway had become impossible.

"Not Victoria. Turn round. Marble Arch, Bayswater Road—and straight on to Beaver's Hill."

"Beaver's Hill!" said the cabman. "Why, it's better part of twelve miles to Beaver's Hill. I shouldn't get back till to-morrow morning. What d'you propose to pay me for such a job?"

"I'll pay you anything you like," said Bird wildly. "Turn round. . . . Drive on."

And all the time in the cab, and again at home, first downstairs, then upstairs, for hour after hour, the pitiable struggle went on. Bird fought hard, feeling indeed almost as if he fought for his life. Amy said that he must never again see or hold the slightest communication with either of the Hebers, and Bird said that he was perfectly willing now and for ever to be done with one of the Hebers, but he could not abandon the other one. One might be guilty but the other was obviously innocent. Why punish both?

She clung to him with all her strength, she pushed him away from her with suffocating screams as if she thought he was about to murder her; she swept his face with her loosened hair, she watered him all over with her warm tears. Both Hebers must be cut—cut dead—wiped from the tablets of memory. It must be as if such a man as Wilfred Heber did not breathe or move anywhere on the surface of this broad earth. "Promise me. Promise that you'll do it." She appealed to his sense of honour, his sense of justice and fair play; to his recollection of the

marriage service; to his hope of future peace and comfort. She made herself large and fierce, she made herself small and weak; and sometimes he thought she had fainted; but whatever she was doing, she never wavered in her resolution. "Promise me"—in a loud cry; "Promise me"—in a swooning whisper. "Be loyal—promise me."

It was long after dawn when he gave in and promised. Shafts of bright sunshine entered the room, birds were singing in the hawthorn tree below their windows, the church clock struck loudly but musically. He felt broken in mind and body as he lay down at her side. In a minute both of them were asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

BIRD kept his promise, and their life went on; but he now admitted to himself that there was little joy in it, and that its quarrels or sharp disagreements were more numerous and intense than could be usual with the bulk of married couples. "Over the average, what?" He suffered in the total loss of his friend and the total loss of personal freedom. He was a man wearing heavy chains, and he felt their weight as he dragged them across the flower borders when digging in the garden on winter days. He was a prisoner taking the prescribed exercise—he was Amy's convict, digging in the private garden just below the governor's windows.

The summer brought him a nauseatingly unpleasant holiday, spent at Llandudno with Amy's family and various neighbours from Beaver's Hill. He had pleaded that, since she was provided with such congenial society and in such quantity, he could not be missed if he did not join them. But she made him go. She said that his not going would be disloyal to her. Loyalty, disloyalty—these words were on her lips as the unfailing signals of an imminent tiff; and when the thing deepened or spread she had a ready wail. "Oh, you regret that you ever married me. You can't deny it." That seemed to knock him down and leave him sprawling at her feet. He dreaded the sound of it and the collapse that it produced. He recovered himself in silence, feeling guilty and ashamed.

And always that semi-insane jealousy of hers was increasing. Even a word of respectful admiration for any other woman, no matter how high-placed or remote, was disloyalty to his wife. There was a picture-poster at Beaver's Hill railway station offering the brilliantly coloured lure of "sunny girls on Normandy's sands," and he could not stand in front of this advertisement without being disloyal. Turning the leaves of illustrated newspapers, if he paused at photographs of beautiful famous actresses, Amy, on the look-out for disloyalty, questioned him; and bitter experience told him how to reply. "No, my dear, it is an unkind thing to say of a lady, but I call her positively ugly. She must be a true genius—to have become so eminent in her career, with that—er—handicap to contend against."

A brief narration of two incidents that occurred during this second autumn will suffice to show the magnitude of the growing trouble.

As may be remembered, their parlourmaid Gladys, who had now been with them for a year and a half, was the reverse of good-looking; but she was an honest, kindly creature, liking her work and doing it well. The brushing of Bird's clothes, the mending of his socks, in fact the care of all his garments, formed a part of her duties. So it happened that one day she and Bird were in his little dressing room with the door open, while Amy was here and there close by on the landing or in the bedroom. And as she said afterward, Amy heard all that passed.

It was a bright keen morning, and Bird was feeling more like what he once used to be; he was not actually light-hearted, but enough so to speak gaily. Moreover, the faithful Gladys had long since won a very secure place in his esteem. He laughed and chaffed with her about

the socks, condemning some to be thrown away, begging that others might be mended once more.

"Yes, Gladys, I say Darn them, and I expect you say Darn them—and darn me, too. Eh, what?" And they both laughed. "But I'm not going to trouble you needlessly. Throw these away. Yes, my dear Gladys, throw 'em away."

Then Amy intervened.

In vain Bird stormed and argued. He had done for both of them by using that too friendly form of address. "My dear Gladys!" Did any one ever hear of such a way of talking—to a maidservant? Her plainness of countenance could not save her. Gladys was summarily dismissed.

"But surely you won't allow this, Mr. Bird," she said again and again.

He had to allow it. He gave her a handsome present of money as well as the month's wages, and Amy, who at first vowed she would give her no character, wrote out a eulogistic testimonial. Amy only wanted to be rid of her. Nothing else really mattered.

The next incident concerned Evelyn.

One morning at breakfast his wife unexpectedly told him that Evelyn and the elderly Mr. Palgrave were coming to London on business; and she calmly added that it would be convenient to them and a pleasure to herself if they were asked to stay at Beaver's Hill for a week. He could not believe that she meant what she was saying, and when she declared that she truly meant it he stared at her across the breakfast table in blank amazement.

"Why shouldn't I, if I want her?" she said. "Eve evidently wants to be asked. What's your objection?"

"*My* objection," said Bird blunderingly. "Have you

forgotten what you've said so often? You said—you know—never, under any circumstances."

"Oh, one speaks hastily sometimes," said Amy, watching his face. "But all that's over and done with. What I can't understand is your reluctance about it. Don't you wish me to have her here?" And Amy's cheeks reddened and she spoke wailingly. "Oh, Birdie, is it that after all this time you still can't trust yourself? You're afraid to be thrown into her company."

Bird shiveringly examined the horrible dilemma with which he was confronted. The notion of having Evelyn here in the house day after day for many days was odious to him; however contrived, intercourse with Evelyn must prove embarrassing, but carried on under his wife's watchful and suspicious eyes it would be well-nigh unbearable. Nothing short of a miracle could carry him through the ordeal without painful scenes. But, on the other hand, if he appeared to shirk it, he was in for certain trouble. Amy would say he was afraid of betraying himself, that he secretly hankered after Evelyn, that in his heart he was disloyal both to Amy and to old Mr. Palgrave. On this score he would be in dire disgrace for ever. "You simply didn't dare meet her. Oh, it's no use pretending"; and so on. Rapidly considering the abominable alternatives, he decided that his better chance was to accept the visit.

Simulating nonchalance and careless good-humour, he begged her to carry out her idea.

"Thank you," said Amy; and going slowly from the room she spoke as if to herself: "I wonder if I am acting wisely."

Whether finding an answer to his question or not, she sent off an effusively worded invitation, and in due course and with equal warmth Evelyn accepted it on behalf of

Mr. Palgrave as well as herself. Bird waited then very miserably for the appointed date to mature, counting the days, saying mutely: "It is this day week; it is in five days; only four days from now." But that same evening, when there were only four clear days left, Amy had a sudden outburst.

Ravingly she announced that she could not and would not have Evelyn under her roof.

"I can't support it. I detest her. I always have. Oh, Birdie, don't force me to do it—show some pity. Have mercy on me." She was clinging to him now, pulling his hands. "Let me put Evelyn off—let me write and say something has happened and we can't have them. Let me write this instant."

When he agreed she was humbly grateful. "Oh, Birdie, you've made me so happy"; and she gave him one of her wolf-like hugs. "Say I'm the only person in all the world that you really care for." And there were a few tears, but in truth tears of joy. "Thank you, thank you. You're so good to me, Birdie—oh, so good. And I'm so horrid to you—so horrid. But I can't help it—oh, I do try." Then meekly and sadly she spoke herself of her jealous propensity, saying that it began when she was a child and had gone on ever since. "Mother wasn't kind to me in some ways—though I did so love her. She was kinder to Effie, and she made a favourite of Freddy. She told them things that she kept secret from me. At school, too—and after that—always I was thinking that when I loved people they didn't really value it—and were ready to throw me over for somebody else. Birdie, it broke my confidence—it broke my heart. Whoever it was, it seemed to be the same—whether it was girl-friends or boy-friends, some beast took them away—some beast who was pretty, with a thin waist—and hadn't r-r-red hair—

came and took them from me." She was sobbing now in his arms, and Bird was administering the usual pats and caresses to comfort her; but in fact this confession that she had made, together with his new understanding that she herself was aware of her weakness and was at any rate sometimes ashamed of it, moved him greatly, stirring both love and compassion. They seemed to be nearer to each other to-night than they had been for a very long time. It was as if they had broken down an ugly barrier that had grown up between them and then clasped hands above the débris.

"Oh, I'm so happy," said Amy again. "You *have* made me so happy."

She sat at her desk and Bird, after lighting a pipe, stood behind her to help her write the letter. It was naturally a difficult letter. Amy, hesitating, and poking the butt-end of the pen into her hair, begged him to dictate the whole thing. He consented, and holding his pipe in one hand, pulled his moustache with the other.

"Dear Evelyn," said Bird beginning to dictate—"Or 'My dear Evelyn,' if that's how you generally start."

"I always call her 'My dearest Evelyn,' " said Amy.

"Very well. Be it so. 'My dearest Evelyn, alas' "; and he paused. " 'Alas'——"

"Do you mean 'Alas' twice?" asked Amy.

"No, only one 'alas,' " said Bird. "Or two, if you wish. It's of no consequence. I'm thinking how you're to go on."

That of course was the real difficulty and they stopped writing for discussion.

Amy had an idea of saying that the ground landlord had unexpectedly sent builders into the house to repair the roof; but Bird did not like this suggestion. He said

that if Evelyn happened to come and pay a call upon Amy she would see that the thing wasn't true. Amy's second idea was illness in the house.

"Far simplest to say I'm ill. I'll tell her I'm really ill —laid up, you know, with a nurse—and forbidden to receive visitors."

"No, Amy, I can't let you say that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's unlucky. I should feel it was tempting Providence."

"You *darling*," said Amy, delighted. "Oh, how I love you for thinking of it in that way."

The letter was finished somehow or other within the next hour, and Bird trotted out to dab it in the pillar-box. He felt five years younger than when he ate his dinner. No ordeal lay ahead of him, and this better understanding with Amy might open an easier epoch for him. All was well.

But two days later Amy seemed to be looking at him queerly at breakfast after she had read the Palgrave letter of reply.

"Well, they're not coming," she said, as she tore the letter to pieces.

"No," said Bird, "naturally. . . . Well, what about it? What's wrong now?"

"Nothing's wrong," said Amy, with the same queer look. "No—only this. Do you mind if I ask you a question? Did you write to Evelyn yourself—at the same time that I wrote my letter?"

"Of course I didn't," said Bird, wounded, and speaking irritably. "Why the devil should I write to her? What d'you mean by asking such a question?"

Amy came prancing round the breakfast table and flung her arms about his neck. "Forgive me. Don't be

angry with me. I *had* to ask—but I felt sure it was all right. But something she said set me thinking—and I thought perhaps you might have sent her a line out of extra politeness—or even offered to meet her in London, as we couldn't have her here."

Bird spluttered and wrestled in his wife's embrace.

"I should have hated that, Birdie—anything like that, behind my back—for whatever reason you did it." And she kissed his forehead and returned to her chair.

Three days later, by a most unfortunate accident, he came face to face with Evelyn in Piccadilly. It was about half-past one, he was on the way to his club, and the accident occurred just outside Devonshire House. She was of course the last person on earth that he wanted to see; but there she was, speaking to him, not a bit offended, only smiling as if amused. He told her half a dozen lies in less than half a minute; and they stood there talking, first about Amy, then about her husband. Mr. Palgrave, it appeared, was in the city; she had arranged to meet him for food, but he had played her false by being detained among his business friends; and she wound up by asking Bird to give her nourishment.

"*Rather*," said Bird, laughing with every indication of gaiety and pleasure. "How lucky! Thank goodness I can be useful to somebody for once in my life"; and he took her across the road to the Ritz Hotel.

What else could a down-trodden but still gallant Bird say or do?

Going home to Beaver's Hill, he thought whether he should tell Amy or not. Better not. But he presently revolted against the unworthiness, the cowardliness of such a reticence. Besides, Amy might find out. Evelyn might tell her.

At dinner he pulled himself together.

"Who do you think I bumped into to-day?" And, without waiting for an answer, "Evelyn Palgrave."

The colour rose in Amy's face, and then she turned pale.

"Oh, how odd," she said. "How very odd! What did you say to Eve?"

She questioned him rigorously. She did not believe in the accident; and feeling outraged and angry, Bird spoke with great bitterness. He parried her questions with one of his own. "Do you doubt my word? I say, do you doubt my word of honour? Answer me." But Amy made him answer her. She asked why, if he had nothing to conceal, did he not continue his explanation.

"You just stood talking to her in the street, as you have described," said Amy, when he had finished. "Will you swear, on your honour, that that was all?"

Bird gulped. "I gave her a bit of luncheon."

Amy almost screamed.

"Where did the meal take place?"

"At the Ritz Hotel."

"At the Ritz? Oh, indeed. The Ritz? You don't take *me* to the Ritz, I notice. But to-day expense was no object, I suppose." And Amy screamed again. "If you took her to the Ritz, then you *must* have done it by appointment—because they're always full there. You wouldn't have got a table unless you had booked it in advance. Or did you engage a private room? I demand to know—I've the right to know. I'll get it out of her, if you refuse to answer. Was it a private room?"

The storm was upon him—more than a storm, a tempest. She raved. After assuring him that he should never see Evelyn again as long as he lived, she began about Daphne Yates.

"You sha'n't see her, either. I'll never let you out of

my sight. Daphne's in London, too. You know that, I suppose. But she sha'n't get at you. . . . Oh, why was I ever born?"

After this things were much worse than they had been before. There were perhaps fewer quarrels, but the wretchedness and discomfort deepened. Bird did not seem to have strength for quarrelling, he gave in before a quarrel could begin; in these sunless winter days it was as if he lost heart altogether and was sinking to an apathetic despair. "I've done all I could for her," he muttered to himself dolefully, as he pottered about the sodden, rain-swept garden. "And in return she makes me ridiculous—she drags me down—she ruins everything. I cannot call my life my own—that's what it amounts to."

Meaning to dig, he brought his spade from the diminutive tool-house, stuck it on end in the flower border; and then, dropping back on gloomy thoughts, forgot that he had fetched the spade and went back to the tool-house to look for it. Finding the spade at last, he dug. The rain fell upon him, and he did not notice that it was raining.

Amy opened an upper window and called to him. Even at that distance she could see that he was wet through. She ran out into the rain and herself brought him to shelter. "Oh, my angel, why *have* you been so foolish? You must be chilled to the bone." She and the ugly new middle-aged parlourmaid prepared a steaming hot bath for him. He was to bathe, put on dry clothes, and stay indoors for the rest of the day. "Then please Heaven," said Amy, trembling in her solicitude, "please Heaven you'll escape any bad consequences."

No matter how miserable she made him, she was still fond of him, passionately fond of him. "Of course I know that," he said to himself. "I have never denied it.

Of course, if not——" And he did not complete the thought. His mind had wandered.

He who used to be so neat and natty neglected his costume nowadays. He could not bear the ministrations of the hideous new parlourmaid, and he neglected to brush his clothes himself. When allowed to go to the club, he did not care how he was dressed; whether suitably for London or in knickerbockers and stockings. At the club he no longer played billiards or cards. He did nothing—or at best sat watching other people do things. He would listen, too, to anybody talking. He, the most loquacious member of the club, had scarce a word to say for himself.

And all this time he suffered from what seemed like a diffuse organic craving, the sort of distress that afflicts a smoker who may not smoke or a drunkard confined in an inebriate's home. Emotionally numbed, he had only this one strong sensation—this incessant desire for Heber. He longed for Heber, he pined for him; thinking, "Just a few hours with the old chap would buck me up and give me courage."

But loyalty forbade. A promise is a promise. Nevertheless the temptation to break his promise and try to see Heber "on the sly" was cruelly hard to resist. And at last he succumbed to the temptation.

It was quite late at night when he ceased to struggle and fell. That evening they had entertained three obnoxious members of Amy's family, and Bird had once more done his best, hospitably beaming at the loathed guests, opening bottles of champagne for them, giving them his choicest cigars; while Amy had been distinctly unkind to him. Now it was all over and she had gone to bed. He softly crept upstairs to make sure that she was really in the bed; and coming down again on tip-toe, feeling like a burglar in his own house, he went to the telephone. It

was a dreadful thing that he was about to do. He had given his word of honour. "I can't help it," he thought desperately. "She has brought it on herself. I'm fed up"; and he unhooked the receiver and asked in a whisper for the Mayfair number.

Chance favoured him. He had feared that the hour might be too late. Mayfair as well as Beaver's Hill perhaps had gone to bed; even if he obtained communication it might be only one of the servants and then there would be delay and difficulty. But after a few seconds Heber's voice was sounding like music in his ear, and he began to whisper cautiously.

"I can't hear," said Heber. "Who is it? Who the devil is it?"

Bird whispering again had a vision of his friend. As if by some wonderful modern improvement the telephone let him see Heber as well as listen to his voice. He saw him standing at the library table, alone in that other silent house, with manuscripts and opened tin boxes, and a large shaded lamp throwing its light in a circle.

"Oh, it's *you*, Birdie!" And Heber's change of tone from extreme irritability to friendliness and affection seemed to give Bird fresh life.

They made an appointment to play golf together.

Henceforth they met secretly, and fairly often. Bird never went to the Mayfair house, but Heber would come round to the club almost at any time if summoned. Bird of course had to wait for chances, to practise worse and worse deceptions, to invent and contrive as ingeniously as possible. He suffered at first under a sense of moral deterioration, then soon grew hardened. The benefit he derived from these stealthy meetings was so tremendous that it made all else seem trivial. They were his only solace. They kept him going.

"What news from Surbiton?" he would ask ingratiatingly. "I hope your mother has shaken off her cold. When is she coming to see us? Or why don't you run over and stay a few days with her?"

When Amy went and paid a two-days' visit to Mrs. Beardsley things were delightfully easy for the conspirator.

She was in very low spirits toward the end of February, and he persuaded her to go to Surbiton again for three nights at least. She at once agreed to do so; but when setting out for the journey she behaved rather strangely, suddenly bursting into tears, and asking Bird if, even at this last moment, he would like her to postpone the visit, or give it up altogether. He of course begged her not to deprive herself of what he knew would be a treat to her.

"You are glad to be rid of me. You want me to go."

Bird said he only wanted her to go for the good of her health.

"But it will make no difference to my health whether I go to-day or next week. I could wire to Mums. Is it that you want me to go to-day particularly?"

Bird, feeling guilty and acting good-humoured carelessness, told her that all days were the same to him. He had prepared himself to lose her company for a little while, and it was of no consequence when the loss fell upon him.

Then Amy went.

It was on this first day, when Bird was about to return from Skeffington Park in Heber's car, that he noticed the shabby man with the black-and-white tie. When he came out of the club house a little ahead of Heber, this man was standing by the car talking to the chauffeur, and

Bird, thinking that he belonged to the place, called him, asking if the caddies had brought the clubs. The man, as if not hearing, hurried away, and the chauffeur told Bird that the clubs were already in the car. The chauffeur said the man had been asking him questions as to where the car was going, whether Bird was going all the way, and so on. Bird said this was dashed cheek.

"Who was he, d'you think?"

"Sort of loafer," said the chauffeur. "Gentleman's servant out of employment, and down on his luck, from the look of him. Ready to pinch something, if one gave him half a chance."

Bird would have thought no more of the matter, if he had not seen the man again next morning at Beaver's Hill. He saw him in the roadway, not far from his own house, and he had the immediate idea that the man was stationed there waiting for him, wanting to speak to him. But the man turned, and walked off briskly in the direction of the station. At the railway station he saw him again, and it now seemed to him that the man was purposely avoiding him. When Bird moved toward him, he went back among the little crowd in the booking-office, and when Bird went into the booking-office, he and his black-and-white tie and low bowler hat had disappeared altogether.

Bird was on his way to meet Heber at Skeffington Park, and at the junction where he changed trains he fancied that he saw the man once more, but was not quite sure. Somebody like him came running up the steps and jumped into the train just before it moved.

The thing was now on Bird's nerves, and he told Heber all about it. "That man is following me," he said, "I haven't the smallest doubt of it. For what purpose, Willy? It's the most extraordinary thing."

They played nine holes before luncheon, and when they came in Heber's chauffeur had nothing to report. Neither he nor any one else had seen a sign of the man. They had told the Caddy Master about this "suspicious customer" and everybody was now on the look-out.

Beyond the tenth hole and the Dreadnought bunker at Skeffington Park there is that little wood which looks so pretty in the summer, with its tangled undergrowth of brambles and wild honeysuckle. It is surrounded by a ditch and a fence, and two or three little bridges and stiles give access to the paths that intersect it. The teeing ground for the eleventh is close to the edge of the wood. Bird won the tenth, and, jauntily preceding Heber to the teeing ground with their caddies behind them, he suddenly saw the man with the black-and-white tie raise his head among the brambles on the other side of the fence.

"There he is," cried Bird excitedly; and he rushed to the nearest bridge while the man disappeared into the recesses of the little wood.

Heber followed; and the two caddies, who were not lads but middle-aged men like Bird and Heber, each snatched a niblick from their dropped bags, and were quickly in pursuit. It was a ridiculous chase. The man dodged hither and thither among the bushes, as if he had been a fox afraid of breaking covert; and with such cries as "There he goes," "Over the path," "He's crossed again," his pursuers crashed after him; hearing the shouts and noise, golf-players outside the wood stopped playing and gathered all round it. Golf at Skeffington Park was at a standstill. Then there came a breathless but triumphant yell from Bird.

"Willy, I've got him."

One could not say if the man had surrendered or been caught by fleetness of foot and resolution of purpose;

but here he was, a captive, being dragged by the arm through the wet branches and out into the open path.

Bird, hot, breathless, full of wrath, held him and shook him, and gasped threats. "You follow me about, will you? What d'you mean by it, you rascal? Dodging me when I try to speak to you, and then following again. Tell me what you mean by it, or I'll knock your head off your shoulders."

"You let me go," said the man, and he began to wriggle.

Bird, furious, clutched at his black-and-white tie, and again vowed vengeance unless the man explained the meaning of his insolent and suspicious conduct.

"Let me go, I say. What business is it of yours? This is a free country. I haven't interfered with you, have I?"

"You're a trespasser here anyhow," said Heber; "and if you don't want to be given in charge you'll answer my questions."

Golf-players had come across all the bridges and were now clustered round the speakers; and after such noise and wild excitement the whole thing seemed very absurd. The two caddies lowered their weapons. Bird, perhaps ashamed of his heat, allowed Heber to control the proceedings.

"I'm only attending to my employment and my profession," the man said in reply to Heber. "I'm doin' what I'm paid to do, and nothin' more. I'm doin' nothin' wrong."

"Are you following this gentleman or are you not?"

The man refused to say.

"Of course he is," roared Bird, getting angry again. "He has been on my heels ever since yesterday afternoon —ever since he asked your chauffeur where I was going."

"Who are your employers?" asked Heber.

After hesitating the man reluctantly brought out a dirty visiting card and gave it to Heber. Heber read what was printed on the card, and then handed it to Bird.

"Abington & Crawford," Bird read, "Private Inquiry Agents, Duchy Street, Strand."

"He's a private detective," Heber whispered.

"Private detective!" Bird echoed the words; and they flew round the assembly.

"A detective! What a lark. Who's he want? What's he doing here?" There were jokes and laughter, and almost immediately the golf-players went back to their game. "What a fuss about nothing. . . . Just like those two fellows Bird and Heber to kick up such a row and throw everybody out of place on the course."

"Willy," said Bird, in a low voice, "let him go now. Yes, I'd rather. We've made him give an account of himself. That's all I wanted."

"Well, I don't know about that. But, of course, if you're satisfied——"

"Quite," said Bird.

So Heber told the man to get out of it, and the caddies, pointing with their niblicks, directed him as to how and where he should cross the course in order to reach the high road. Outside the wood again, the four of them stood watching him as he slunk away.

Bird had become silent. He foozled his delayed drive, and was beaten three up with two to play.

When he got home he heard that Amy had unexpectedly returned. As had been arranged, she was not due till next day. He stood in the hall pulling his moustache, and then went resolutely upstairs to her room. The door was locked.

"You can't come in," said Amy. "I'm changing."

"I wish to speak to you," said Bird.

"Oh, but you can't—not now," said Amy, in a queerly plaintive and humble voice. "After dinner, Birdie dear. Not till then, please."

She did not come downstairs until the ugly parlour-maid had twice beaten the musical pipes that served as a dinner gong. Bird, in fact, had finished his soup when she appeared. After an attempt at conversation on her part they were both silent; but from time to time all through dinner they looked at each other, he resolutely and she with a strange timidity. At her request they had coffee in the dining room; she seemed loath to leave the table, or to permit the maid to withdraw.

At last they were alone in the drawing room. Bird seated himself on the sofa; his broad face looked weary and sad, but he had about him the air of portentous dignity and when he spoke it was in the slightly theatrical manner peculiar to such moments as he felt to be making crises or marking epochs of life.

"Amy, listen to me, please."

"Yes, dear." She was by the piano, shuffling books of music along the top of it. "Yes?"

"What I have to tell you is this," said Bird with terrific portentousness. "While you were away, something very remarkable has happened—very regrettable, as I think. I have been *shadowed*."

"Oh," said Amy faintly.

"Do you understand? I have had a man dogging my footsteps, *shadowing* me. I have been followed everywhere—by a private detective. Only this afternoon did I make the discovery of——"

Amy came and knelt before him, surrounded him with her arms, and burst into tears. Then letting her face fall upon his knees, she sobbingly confessed.

"Oh, Birdie, forgive me," she sobbed. "I tried to stop him this morning. I telegraphed—but it was too late. When I got their report of yesterday—showing that you'd only been to Skef-skef-skeffington Park—with, with —Mr. Heber—I saw how wicked I'd been to suspect you——"

And she implored his pardon; begging him to put himself in her place, to see things as they seemed to her, and then exonerate her from this crushing blame. She said that some time ago his whole manner toward her had changed. Not being blind, she had seen at once that he had entered at once upon a course of concealment and subterfuge. Obviously, oh, too obviously, he was hiding something from her. He had a secret, a quite new secret. Soon she understood that he greedily seized every opportunity to get away from her; he manœuvred to occupy her with engagements; he seemed to jump for joy whenever her mother invited her to Surbiton. If he was left alone at any time of the day he flew off to London. And, worst sign of all, when he came back after each mysterious, clumsily explained absence, he appeared to be joyous and elated; his eye flashed, his cheek glowed; he had an aspect of wicked triumph. In these circumstances, seeing all these signs, how could she help suspecting that he had "taken up with a woman"—not necessarily Evelyn or Daphne, but some woman or other. She prayed that he would be just when he had done being angry, and admit that any wife in Europe must have thought the same thing. And she vowed that it was only in her despair, as a last resource, that she had done what offended him. She had not wanted to do it, she had hated doing it—but her mother had said the only way to find out for certain was to have him watched.

"And remember, Birdie, when I was going I asked you

to let me postpone my visit to Mums. Oh, if you had shown a spark of feeling, I'd have wired to them then, and nothing would have happened. Say you understand. Say you forgive me."

But Bird was unappeasable. He said and felt that she had dragged him down into the dirt, as well as making him ridiculous and a "laughing-stock" for the universe. He said that she and her mother were two of a kind, and he would never be able to pardon them for the mean and underhand character of their action. Forgetting that he himself had been practising deceit, he said the detective affair was the limit. It put the lid on. When he had exhausted himself, and the time being come for endearments, Amy plied him with caresses, he refused them, and said "I can't. These degrading and disgusting reconciliations are worse than our quarrels themselves."

Yes, that night Bird said dreadful things—things that he soon regretted, and that he was destined to regret much more later on.

They made it up after a day or two, and life went on again; but they had sunk now to a settled state of discomfort. It was as if the wall between them had been rebuilt, and of solid masonry this time instead of those flimsy materials that once they had been able to pull down. Yet in one respect Bird should have found an improvement of his condition, for he was now at liberty to see Heber if he wished to do so. In the tempest caused by the shadowing of her husband, Amy had accepted the breach of his promise as though it was nothing at all; or because of her own shame and the vindication of Bird's innocence with regard to one sex, she determined never again to reproach him for his conduct with regard to the other sex. He might play golf every day with one man or a hundred men. But Bird stayed at home almost

continuously. In truth, he dared not any longer go about with Heber. He could not trust himself; he thought that he would have to tell Heber everything; and he felt that if he did that, his last scrap of self-respect would be destroyed.

He worked at his gardening. There was quite a nice show of crocuses in the flower borders and he carefully arranged strings on wooden pegs to keep away his namesakes. The weak yet vivifying sun of early spring flickered about these white and mauve blooms, and sometimes he thought of Amy and there was a flicker of hope in his heart.

"I believe," he said to himself, "that the bottom of the trouble is our being childless. If we had a few kiddies for her to look after, it might still be all right. But we'd leave here. We'd go right away into the country and make a fresh start."

A gleam of sunlight and a gleam of hope—but at other times he knew that he was a very unhappy man.

A week later Amy told him that she was going to have a baby; and Mr. Lee, the ordinary sort of general practitioner on whose advice they relied in regard to Amy's headaches and other trifling derangements, said the same thing. Wonderful feelings arose in Bird when he saw the future with himself as a father. He hoped it would be a boy, yet resolved to be every bit as fond of a girl.

The happy event could not be expected before the autumn; but poor little Amy at once assumed the status and privileges of an invalid, and Bird waited upon her hand and foot. That wall was down again, knocked down by fairy wands, and they had clambered over the ruin of it into each other's arms.

Bird was sentimental, poetical, as they slowly paraded round the Common on fine afternoons or drove gently toward Act on in a hired fly. He stayed at home now because he did not want to be anywhere else; and they had pretty little jokes and chaff together about the cock-bird's duty while the hen-bird is obliged to sit in the nest. She used to go to bed directly after dinner, and Bird came and read to her—amongst other famous pieces of literature, "The Luck of Roaring Camp."

" 'He wrastled with my thumb!' What!"

There was no hint of danger until the end of July, when Amy fell ill. Why was she ill? Dr. Lee did not really know, although he pretended to know all about it and allowed the illness to drift on without interference from him. Then unexpectedly he told Bird that he considered he should be doing less than his duty if he did not sound a note of alarm. Alas, Bird had had little experience of general practitioners of this class, and therefore failed even then to understand that sometimes when they sound their note of alarm they could more properly describe it as a funeral knell.

There came a specialist from Harley Street and another from a woman's hospital, bringing with them fear; abominable, overpowering fear that filled the house, that set it trembling from its gabled, cheaply built roof to its small, inadequate cellars. Bird was frantic, telling them distractedly that money was no object, that they must summon more specialists to their aid, that Amy was a strong girl, a healthy girl, a girl with a magnificent constitution who had never been ill before. He could not, he would not believe in so remorseless, so meaningless a tragedy as that which was approaching him.

It seemed then like a swift and horrible dream. Night was the same as day, while he wandered about the house,

wild and unshaven, standing now at a nurse's elbow as she ate her food, kneeling now at a door to listen, meeting everywhere one or another of his wife's relations. A nurse led him, as if he had been a child, into his room downstairs and he sat upon the camp bedstead and was begged to stay there as long as the doctors remained upstairs. And the atrocious dream went on. Those doctors were in his room now, looking at him with pity, talking to him, preparing him for the end.

Hours passed, sleepless, horrible hours, and he was standing with the others in her room, in *their* room, although now it seemed a strange room that he had never entered before. A nurse switched off the electric light and the light of dawn came in—the light of dawn that had fallen upon them here in this room as they quarrelled or made it up or lay sleeping peacefully side by side; and in the mingled grayness and faint radiance, with the shadows seeming to move and all things to become ghostly and unsubstantial, he looked at her pale, ghostly face and felt that he would give his life a hundred times to save the life that was going from him. As they all noticed and recorded, she knew him—she knew him, although she knew no one else. She was looking at him, and in her face he saw the fondness that had never wavered, that had always deepened and grown stronger. It seemed to shine at him now supernaturally, as a light too far off really to be seen by mortal eyes and yet mysteriously reaching them; for a moment defying space, conquering the black immensities, victoriously shining. Then in another moment it had gone, and the darkness triumphed.

It was high noon again. Bird, seated on the camp bedstead with a blotting-pad upon his knees, was writing a telegram for somebody to take to the post office.

"To Wilfred Heber, Colwyn Street, Mayfair. My darling wife died at four o'clock this morning. Come to me. Bird."

The telegraph form had been carried away and he sat alone wiping his eyes and sniffing. And once again, as if from nowhere, a thought came into his mind. He thought, "I did all I could. I am not to blame. It is over, and my freedom has been restored to me."

There was scarcely any emotion with the thought, either of horror or relief. It had entered his mind and then passed out of it. Immediately the unbearable pain of grief resumed possession of him; and he sat shivering and weeping.

CHAPTER XIV

HEBER remained in the house with him, got rid of the family, did everything for him; and on the day after the funeral took him across the Channel to a little place called St. Ambrose on the coast near Boulogne.

Bird surrendered himself into his friend's hands, making no attempt to act independently, behaving as if he had been a large child in charge of a grown-up person. Their bedrooms at the hotel were side by side, and of a morning Heber used to come through the door of communication carrying Bird's breakfast on a tray. He pulled up the window blind, tidied the room, brushed clothes, while he encouraged Bird to drink the nice hot coffee and nibble at a roll and butter. Then he hung about the corridor until he could secure access to the bath-room; and after Bird had bathed and shaved he'd help him to dress, laying out his suit of gray flannels, offering him a choice of black ties, standing by with collar stud and handkerchief. He was valet, nurse, and companion all in one.

As soon as Bird was ready he took him out into the sunlight, through the gay little French street, by the bridge over the river, to the sandy, wind-swept paths that mount among fantastic, many-coloured villas and lead one to the cliffs. He used to say: "It's your health we have to think of, Birdie. You must keep out and about, even if you feel tired."

And Bird, making a noise that sounded as if he had snorted and sobbed at the same time, muttered feebly:

"Thank you, old chap. Never thank you enough, I'm sure."

Perhaps that was all their conversation for an hour or more. After walking along the cliff paths to some point high above the placid sparkling sea they sat down, and Heber read his newspaper while Bird plucked at the coarse grass, or picking a tiny wild flower, stared mournfully at its simple yet beautiful conformation.

Large French families, father and mother, with children of every possible size, on their way to another village, young ladies with tennis rackets, noisy young men in preposterous low-necked shirts, happy groups of holiday-makers, all glanced at Heber and Bird in passing; and saw without interest these two middle-aged men. Even to closer observers they would have seemed just such an ordinary, commonplace couple as you may see by hundreds all along the French coast any day from June to September, very uninteresting, very silent, very British; one of them short and stout, with a plump broad face and a fair moustache, showing a bald forehead as he lifted his cloth cap to let the sea-breeze play over his head; the other one tall and thin, with iron-gray hair, and sallow cheeks on which came deep downward lines, marking them, giving to his whole dark face an expression of querulous disapproval as he read the *Times*. But now and then this one, looking over the top of the paper, shed upon his companion a queer bilious sort of smile, or, refolding the paper, gave him a pat on the knee before he began to read again.

No passer-by could by any possibility have guessed what these slight marks of attention meant to the short stout person in the black tie. Nobody on earth could have understood that here was an almost heart-broken man being slowly comforted by his life-long friend.

Indeed the gentleness and sweetness of Heber during these sad days seemed almost miraculous. All his strongest individual characteristics had disappeared; he subordinated himself to Bird's needs; he had no thought except for Bird's welfare. At their hotel the waiting was always bad and the food sometimes execrable; yet Heber never once abused the waiters or complained of the cook. He behaved as if he did not know what he was eating. To Bird, of course, all food was tasteless.

One morning after breakfast Bird began to talk, and he went on talking for three days.

It was in this pouring out of his soul that he found the beginning of real comfort. The relief afforded by unchecked garrulousness after three years of repression was of itself very great; but the true sense of ease came from the affection and sympathy that Heber gave him throughout the talk. Heber encouraged him to go on talking, with a few words started him again whenever he seemed in danger of lapsing to silence.

Bird said the burden upon him was more than grief, it was remorse.

"I wasn't kind enough to her, Willy—oh, nothing like kind enough. I used to think I was doing my best, but I wasn't."

"Tell me," said Heber, listening with grave attention, "where you think you failed."

"Well, for one thing, about a motor-car. I ought to have got Amy a car—or hired one. Good gracious, it was so natural of her to want it. But then, of course, there was the expense. We were spending such a devil of a lot, as it was—and I didn't think it right to touch capital. Oh, how I wish I had. What's money now?"

"Yes, but really, old boy, I don't feel that you should

blame yourself for considering ways and means at the time. It was in her interest as well as your own."

"Then there were her relations. I wasn't kind about them—not really kind. I did my best. No, I *didn't* do my best. That's the sting—that's the agony—now that it's too late. Of course they tried me pretty high. Her brother was the limit. As to the others—well, you saw what they were, about poor Amy's hats and things. Harpies! What?"

Heber nodded his head once or twice.

"But her mother, Willy! It's about her mother that I reproach myself most of all—because that was where I ought to have sacrificed all my own inclinations to give pleasure to Amy. I did nothing for her mother. I dodged her whenever I could—I acted meanly in shuffling Amy on to her and her on to Amy. Oh, my conduct was dreadful toward her mother."

"Honestly, I am doubtful," said Heber, "if Mrs. Beardsley could have found a son-in-law who would have become genuinely attached to her. Yes, I am sure that another son-in-law might have shown her even less consideration."

"Oh, I'd like to think so, Willy. I do reproach myself so bitterly—now that it's too late. I let Amy see things that I should have kept from her. I was cruel to her—she said so herself, sometimes. And all the while she was giving me such love, Willy. Think of the difference of our ages. I was old enough to be her father—if I had married young. A girl like that to care for me—in such a way—don't you know!"

And Bird told more and more. He had to tell it now—his secret thoughts, his innermost revolts and rebellions, his suffering and distress because he felt that all personal liberty had been taken from him and that he was sinking

into a state of morose stupefaction. He even told of Amy's tears. The only thing that he kept back was her jealousy. It was difficult not to let that go, too; but he was held in check by the feeling that this must remain for ever secret and sacred, that it would be a betrayal, a sacrilege, to touch on this weakness of his dead wife. It must be forgotten, if possible, by him himself.

Then, after three days, when Bird had no more to confess and the time came for the listener to speak, Heber spoke most wonderfully. As Bird felt, he was like a priest absolving a penitent, a physician laying balm on wounds, a surgeon bandaging strained ligaments. He told Bird that regret for not having done more for those we have lost is a universal and unavoidable feeling. He said he had experienced it himself when his father died. He soared into such philosophy as was unattainable to Bird alone; and Bird, recognizing its splendour, thought of the brain of Heber—saying to himself, "That's what does the trick, intellect. It was always the same. Willy's mental powers compared with mine are simply a locomotive engine to a wheelbarrow." His gratitude overflowed.

He thought also of that time at Brighton when he had been the comforter and Heber the afflicted one. How poorly he had performed his task, how mean-spirited had been his weariness and repinings. He felt ashamed as he remembered his failure in true friendship then and realized how fully Heber was answering the call of friendship now.

Once it seemed to him that Heber, in the course of his comforting utterances, was on the very verge of a personal admission. In fact, for a moment he felt sure that Heber was about to say that his own marriage had not truly been a success. He looked at Heber anxiously and sympathet-

ically; but the moment passed without any disclosure. Heber seemed to have an inward recoil; his face grew darker; he shrugged his shoulders. Then, when he spoke again, he used the turn of words that had never failed, and did not now fail, to impress Bird with their loftiness and finality. They came only on the greatest occasions, seeming to close a chapter of life firmly and grandly.

"At any rate, you have been really loved, Birdie. That is what you will have to remember always—even if you and I never speak of these things again."

And it was almost immediately after this that Heber, standing on the highest part of the cliff path, pointed to a valley at a little distance inland and told Bird that the bed of the valley and portions of the hill-sides had been converted by the enterprise of English people into an eighteen-hole golf course.

"There. I can just make out a couple of the flags—red and white. You know, not only the lie of the land but the nature of the soil is very promising. It is much more *like* golf than Le Touquet or any other place on this coast. It only requires money to be spent on it. . . . You didn't bring your clubs, did you?"

"Oh, no."

"I dare say you could borrow some from the professional."

"Oh, no," said Bird, in the piteous, nearly tearful tone of a child who is startled if not frightened by the strange proposal of a revered guardian. "Oh, no. I shouldn't have the heart to play."

Heber spoke in a manner so firm as to appear stern and severe.

"If it is for the good of your health, you must not shirk it. Nothing must count except considerations of health."

They played a little golf, and the exercise was beneficial to Bird. The taste returned to his food; he no longer left one and a half uneaten rolls of crisp bread on his breakfast tray of a morning; he dressed himself without assistance. And Heber presently procured a boat in which they went out fishing on such days as they did not care for golf. Bird loved the long, lazy hours in the boat, which they anchored generally near some rocks not far from the shore; as in the old time they took a man with them to do most of the real fishing; with books, pipes, and a picnic basket supplied by the hotel, with each other for company, they found that the time passed swiftly.

The sun shone all day long upon the stretching sands, the hundreds of tents and bathing-huts, the brightly coloured villas, the white towers and red roof of the casino; and behind you had the comfortable, smooth green hills; on either hand bold cliffs and promontories; busy ships crossed the plain of waters and stained the blue sky with widening ribbons of smoke. It was high summer, holiday-time; in the scene and in the air there was an invincible gaiety of joyousness—a defiance of sorrow and regret that seemed to be given by all this life, movement, and light.

Bird was not happy, but he wished that he could stay here with Heber for ever.

Once when he spoke of his sense of obligation Heber said he had enjoyed this quiet time enormously; and when Bird hinted that he felt uneasiness at the thought of depriving Mrs. Heber of her husband's society, Heber said it was all right, it had "worked out very luckily." Mrs. Heber was at Homburg with friends.

"Do you remember Reggie Baldwin? Quite a nice cheerful lad—one of Clarice's infant school, you know.

Well, she has joined forces with Reggie's people, and they're going on to Cadenabbia. I'm to meet her in Paris toward the end of September."

"And the children?" asked Bird.

"At a farm house on Dartmoor," said Heber. "Clarice wanted them to see the real country, you know."

The summer season was over, the last of the visitors had left these pleasant coast villages, nearly all the hotels and villas and casinos were showing closed doors and shuttered windows, when the two friends said good-bye on the quay at Boulogne. Heber entered the Paris train, and Bird crossed the gangway to the English boat.

Then once more Bird found himself alone in London.

That house at Beaver's Hill was no longer his; he had disposed of the lease and sold the furniture. He took rooms within easy reach of the club, unpacked his many boxes, and made himself as comfortable as might be. He was a bachelor again.

And four or five quiet and colourless, yet on the whole contented, years passed over his increasingly bald head—years with so few events in them that he ceased to keep a diary. He joined the Marylebone Cricket Club, frequented Lord's, and often wore the red-and-yellow necktie. It went well with his complexion and gave him a maturely sporting air. In these years the annual visit to Beach End with Heber was resumed after the longish interruption, and it was at this period that they both subscribed so largely to avert a collapse of the golf club.

Mrs. Heber encouraged them to go about together, and herself arranged meetings which might not otherwise have occurred; she treated Bird with an unvarying kindness and deference, she made much of him, she petted him. For a long while he resisted her blandishments, struggled

not to submit to her charm; but it was no use. "Now, Mr. Bird," she used to say, smiling at him, even tapping him with her slender forefinger, "I'm not going to take 'No' for an answer. I won't listen to any excuses or naughty, hurriedly invented fibs. You are to dine here to-morrow and Saturday as well." And she often said: "You are to behave here exactly as if you were at home. We don't consider you a visitor but one of ourselves." In fact, her words and manner alike suggested that he was as indispensable to her as to her husband. Little by little, then, Bird gave her obedience in exchange for her courtesies. He did not like her, he felt that he never would like her, and there seemed to be something of "disloyalty" to poor Amy in even affecting friendliness. He hated himself the first time that he went to the Colwyn Street house, but having gone once he had to go always. He wanted W. H., and he could only have him safely on the lady's terms.

But little by little also his grief had gone from him, leaving only regret—regret not for himself but for her—that sadness and horror which are caused by death itself, whenever and wherever it forces one to measure its irrevocable work. He felt twinges that were scarcely sharp enough for pain; he felt mournfulness that was too impersonal to be wholly sad. Thus, happening to be at the Victoria District Railway Station, he sighed heavily when a train came in with carriage boards marked *Beaver's Hill;* and once, sitting by himself in his room late at night, he thought of some photographs that lay in a drawer of the table close to his hand. He had not looked at those photographs for ages. Thinking of them now, he had a queer sensation of unreality. Was it all true? Could it be possible? Had that tremendous adventure of married life really left no more behind it than this? A few

photographs in a drawer; and these memories—memories of the wardrobe with an open door and Amy's coats hanging neatly on the pegs, her card-case and gloves on the hall-table, a cloud of steam and the smell of her bath salts?

CHAPTER XV

SUDDENLY Bird's whole existence became a dreadful nerve-disturbing study of Mrs. Heber.

It began one night after dinner. Janet, now a tall girl of sixteen and Tony, about to exchange his preparatory school for Harrow, were at home for the Easter holidays, and, after being allowed to dine with the grown-ups, had not yet been dismissed to bed. They were all together in the drawing room—the children, Heber, Clarice; Bird, the friend of the family; and Claud Landen, a young soldier who within recent times had been admitted to attendance upon Mrs. Heber. Bird was feeling very comfortable and contented, sitting in an easy chair, smoking a cigarette, and beaming at everybody. Heber had just gratified him by asking for his opinion on an article in the *Fortnightly Review*, and begging him to read it. The *Review* lay open on Bird's knees.

Heber himself, with his hands in his pockets, was moving about the room restlessly, as if he had not been given enough exercise during the day. Mrs. Heber was seated upon a sofa in a graceful attitude, and young Mr. Claud sat on a chair near her, and talked to her reverentially.

Janet, obeying an order, went to the piano and played an extremely difficult piece of music, Tony turning over the leaves for her. Bird beat time with his hand, trying to make classical music accommodate itself to his own notions of melodious rhythm; and all the while he was thinking that he had never seen Mrs. Heber look so handsome.

"Wears well, upon my word, and no mistake," he thought to himself. . . . "I've always said so—devilish attractive woman. But I wish she'd drop her nonsense with these juvenile hangers-on—her infant admirers. It isn't dignified at her age. For, though she doesn't look it, there it is, and there's no getting away from it. And this young fellow—what's-his-name?—Landen—is older than the others. He ought to know better. A soldier—with all his various duties—philandering! . . . Thank you, Janet," said Bird aloud, and he clapped his hands. "That was top-hole. And you played it like a regular professional."

"Yes, hasn't she improved?" said Mrs. Heber languidly.

Janet stood by the piano, meekly staring at everybody in turn.

"Shall I play something else?"

"No, dear," said Mrs. Heber. "Go to bed now. And you, too, Tony."

When the children had gone Heber continued to wander about the room in the same restless manner, and Bird picked up his *Review* and was on the point of immersing himself when something occurred to startle him. He saw Mrs. Heber make a sign to Mr. Claud Landen. It was very slight, this sign, but staggeringly intimate, quite appalling in its implication of secret understandings; just a movement of the eyes, a significant glance; and, to Bird, who knew her so well, it plainly drew attention to her husband and indicated that something must be done in regard to him.

Mr. Landen got up at once and asked Heber if he would care to play a game at piquet.

"Would you really care for a game yourself?"

"Yes, I should love it."

Then, as they fetched out the card-table, Bird saw her

give the young man a look—a look that Bird could not have described, a look that he had never seen upon her face before, such a look as no married lady should in any circumstances give to a gentleman except the one to whom she is married. It made Bird hot and cold. Then and there it aroused the terrible question: Was Mrs. Heber a very wicked woman, carrying on a guilty intrigue with this young man? He lifted the *Review* to hide his emotion and pretended to read.

"Don't trouble about that if it bores you," said Heber gaily, as he sat down to his game. He was pleased, eagerly shuffling the cards. "Or come and make it *chouette*."

Bird begged to be permitted to read—"If Mrs. Heber won't think me rude."

"How can you ask?" said Mrs. Heber sweetly. She had seated herself at the table beside Mr. Landen, not beside her husband.

The mental disturbance of Bird, together with the alternating sensations of warmth and coldness, was very great indeed. His thoughts were wide and rapid; questions rained upon him; tracts of unconsidered time, large patches of the forgotten past that had been dark until two minutes ago now seemed to spring forward at him in the lurid light of a new comprehension. Those boys, the Reggies, Dollies, and Archies—had any of it been innocent? Caverns of iniquity opened out before him. He thought of her as a monster, snatching at all these young tender lives, depraving them, one after another, luring them to be her victims—watching them attain adolescence, waiting for them until when they had passed through all the perils of a public school and stood clean and wholesome on the threshold of manly existence, she crept close and pounced. "Pounced upon 'em, what!"

Bird's tongue became dry in his mouth and his blue eyes grew larger and larger behind the upraised volume. No, no, it was too horrible to think of. He could not, he would not believe such an abomination possible. The dalliance with Dolly, Algy, and those others was merely silliness, no more.

But the current episode was serious, deadly serious. This fellow was older than those others, twenty-eight years of age at least if not more; this fellow had long outgrown calf-love and that sort of thing; this fellow—whose sleek round head he would very much like to knock off his firm, square shoulders—knew what he was about thoroughly well. Yes, by Jove.

And Bird thought how, if you accepted as a fact the falseness and turpitude of Mrs. Heber, everything explained itself. Taking the worst view, he could see an obvious explanation for all that she had ever said or done. Oh, with what flagrant assiduity she had used him, Bird! She had made of Bird the petted plaything that kept Heber occupied, that distracted his attention at important or dangerous moments, that tempted him away from home when she wanted an empty house and detained him safe at home when she herself was wandering. Through Bird she had given herself absolute freedom. That was the meaning and reason of her kindness, confidential friendliness, and almost sisterly affection during the last few years. He saw, too, how completely he had yielded himself to her guidance and manipulation; he had put his whole life in her hands, and, as if it had been a lump of putty, had allowed her to mould it, to change its shape, from day to day, from hour to hour, exactly as she chose. Without knowing it till now, he had been the abject slave of her caprices; imagining that he laid plans, considered alternatives, and made decisions, he had been ruled by her

in everything; it was she who really decided. It was by her will and not their wills that he and Heber went for their summer holiday on a certain date and returned on another fixed date. And with an angry bewilderment he said to himself: "Take to-night as an example. Why am I here at all? Not because I wanted to come, but because she compelled me. I said I couldn't come to-night, having engaged to dine with Vincent at the club, and she made me chuck Vincent—a thing I dislike doing." He lowered the book and stared across the room at her—at her bronze hair, her bare shoulder blades, her thin ears and pearl earrings; for her back was turned to him and he could not see that face of hers. She seemed to him like destiny itself. Nobody else in the room was a free agent. "And, good heavens," he thought, again with the same amazed wrath and personal resentment, "she has arranged to-morrow for me, too. I am to play golf with Wilfred, whether I like it or not; we are to start early—that is the edict—and make a long day of it. . . ." With difficulty he suppressed a snort. "But oh, no, my lady, so far as I am concerned, with or without your permission, your kind arrangements on my behalf will come to an end to-morrow evening. That's the last appointment you need book for me, if you don't mind."

Then the more altruistic indignation possessed him. He thought about her shameful treatment of his beloved friend. This was most horrible to Bird. He put the book down. The little picture formed by the card-table and the card-players fascinated him, held his eyes. Mr. Landen was losing—losing on purpose probably, allowing himself to be piqued and repiqued and capoted, put under rubicons, done anything to; the woman laughed, praised the winner, flattered him, said he was a mercilessly strong opponent; and the host, the friend, the husband, was

pleased, radiantly pleased. He was *enjoying* himself. No words can convey what the watchful observer felt, being forced to see Heber sitting there, hoodwinked, betrayed, and yet showing pleasure and contentment; as it were, wallowing in his unfortunate situation, seeming to take dishonour from them as a welcome gift, and himself to help them as they covered him with disgrace. Bird, almost bursting, wanted to go and slap Heber smartly on the shoulder, to cry out loudly: "Throw away these tainted playing-cards. Pitch this young blackguard out of your house. Wash your hands of this serpent-wife."

He did nothing of the sort, of course; but, as may be supposed, so much emotion must naturally produce some untoward effect. During the next hour he felt himself that his manner had become very strange; but he was aware also that nobody noticed it. They were engrossed by the game, only speaking to him occasionally and not listening to what he said in reply. When the servants brought the tray with decanters and biscuits, he drank three glasses of undiluted soda water, and after the third glass abruptly asked permission to retire.

"So early?" said Mrs. Heber, looking round at him over one of her naked collar bones with a honey-sweet smile and speaking in a tone of gentle reproach. But she added, as if seeking an apology or excuse for his unkindness, "Well, of course, you have a long day before you to-morrow."

Then an inspiration came to Bird. It occurred to him that he need not really wait until to-morrow evening to emancipate himself and bring an end to the odious assistance she derived from his submission. He would do it now. He would baulk her arrangements suddenly and unexpectedly. "Yes, my lady," he thought, "I'll upset your apple cart straight away and watch the result." Accord-

ingly, he cleared his throat, drew nearer to the card-table, and announced that he found himself obliged to scratch the golf appointment.

This brought Mrs. Heber to her feet in a moment, and she fought hard to make him withdraw his ultimatum.

"Oh, no. What a dastardly suggestion! What *can* you be thinking off?" She dealt with him archly and playfully at first. "Mr. Bird, this is very, very naughty of you. This isn't like you at all," and she came quite close to him and gave him smiles of almost nauseating sweetness. "Our faithful one—our strong rock—our tower and fortress!" As she said these things she took both lapels of his dinner jacket in the tips of her fingers, playfully drawing them together across his broad shirt front. "Don't be rebellious. Say at once that you didn't mean it and that you'll do what you're told."

But then, when Bird stated resolutely and rather loudly that it was impossible for him to obey her, she ceased smiling. Her face became grave and she drew him gently away to the fire, and began to whisper confidentially.

"Mr. Bird, you really mustn't throw Wilfred over. He has been looking forward to it all the week. He has *counted* on it." She had resumed the sisterly manner; she spoke in the benevolently secret way that he knew so well—as if she and he admittedly had but one task in life, the guarding and sheltering of Heber, the comforting of Heber in his dark hours, the bringing what innocent joy they could to the noble creature they both worshipped. "I have been wanting to tell you. He *needs* relaxation. In these last few days I have been anxious about him. He seems so fidgety and fussy—*you* know—*nervy*—on edge. And if he has this disappointment——"

"Oh, he'll get over it," said Bird, in the same noisy theatrical voice that he had employed a minute ago. And

he almost shouted across the room. "Very sorry, Wilfred, old chap, that it's got to be a wash-out. But we'll fix it up some other day."

"Whenever you like," said Heber, looking at his cards and beginning to call them. "Point, clubs. Quint to the king. . . ."

Mrs. Heber shrugged her lean shoulders and gave a short, hard laugh. She was angry now, sulkily yet burningly angry. Bird, watching, saw two little dints in the flesh on both sides of her nostrils, and there was a spasmodic tremor at one corner of her mouth. "She would like to murder me," he thought. Yet, as he knew, she did not even vaguely guess why he had thwarted her. She had not the slightest suspicion of the suspicions that had been aroused in his breast. But this absence of fear on her part was no proof of innocence. No, it merely showed her confidence in his denseness and stupidity; she had made a fool of him so successfully and for so long a time that she considered herself quite secure.

He went away from the house feeling utterly miserable. What a horrible state of affairs! And how was he to act in regard to it?

Waking next morning he was full of doubt. Had he been mistaken? Was there nothing really wrong? It seemed to him now that his suspicions were perhaps altogether baseless. He blamed himself for his hastiness and excitability. All that tremendous incident of Mrs. Heber had been piled up after starting from the merest trifle, an intercepted glance; from that point onward the whole thing had been the work of his own imagination —an unhealthy imagination. "So I hope it may turn out to be." He dressed hopefully. But after breakfast his over-night conviction of guilt returned to him stronger than ever. Of course she was a bad lot and always had

been. Sooner or later poor old Willy's eyes would be opened and there would come such a storm and crash in Colwyn Street as Mayfair did not often have to face. Then as he continued to turn things over in his mind, Bird was seized with a most horrible and painful thought.

Suppose Heber knew and did not mind? What if his eyes had been opened long ago and then after the shock of surprise he had closed them again? Anything for peace and quiet, what?

This hateful idea had but a transient grip upon Bird, and he dismissed it, scorning himself for having entertained it even for a moment. W. H.—the most sensitive as well as the proudest of men! What next? "I am not myself," said Bird. "I am quite knocked over."

About mid-day he went round to Colwyn Street; partly because he wanted to find out how matters were progressing, and more because he could not keep away from the house. As soon as the front door gaped he asked the servant, unceremoniously: "Shall I find Mr. Heber in the library?"

The servant said no; he had gone out of London to play golf.

"Golf! Who with?"

"With Mr. Landen, sir."

"Oh! I see." Bird lingered on the doorstep, hesitating, then suddenly became determined and asked if Mrs. Heber was at home.

"No, sir. Mrs. Heber went with them."

After this Bird had no further doubt. When had she ever shown her thin nose on a golf course till now? No; but to-day, having Wilfred unexpectedly on her hands, a fretful and fidgety Wilfred, too, she had been forced to employ Landen for the purpose of amusing him; and,

unable to relinquish the loved one's society altogether, she accompanied them in an excursion which was entirely distasteful to her. Better the meagre corner of a loaf, rather than no bread.

Moreover, in the following weeks, he intercepted glances complementary to the one previously recorded: he saw Claud Landen, when he fancied himself unobserved, looking at Mrs. Heber. These looks of Landen were of the most adoring character; they were eloquent of blind faith; they were childlike and doglike in their yearning fidelity. It was infatuation. Bird thought: "Bother it all, what does she do to people to get hold of them as she does—Willy H. himself, that procession of boys, this chap, everyone she goes for? Perhaps this fellow Landen might be quite a decent sort, if she had left him alone and not tampered with him. It is not really his fault; all the blame belongs to her."

Engrossed, perplexed, worried almost to death by it, Bird lived now in such an atmosphere as is often created by modern French writers for their novels and plays. He was afraid of seeing Mrs. Heber and the young man embrace as they passed through a doorway, fall into each other's arms when they had momentarily forgotten that he happened to be in the room, or by some other flagrant lapse betray themselves irrefutably. He had at last decided on his own line of conduct. Although he knew that he knew, he told himself that he did not know for certain. Conjectures, however probable, are not facts. "But if I am confronted with proofs I will do my plain duty and open Willy's eyes. It will be intensely painful, a horrible ordeal for both of us; but I will go through with it. If *certain*, I cannot and I will not allow W. H. to remain in shameful bondage."

Landen belonged to a cavalry regiment that was sta-

tioned at Hounslow; he possessed a small motor-car, and from his conveniently placed quarters he could run up and down at all times and in less than no time, while, quite possibly, Mrs. Heber went to the extreme length of visiting him at the barracks. Bird, speaking very cautiously of the immense amount of leave that was granted to this officer, found that Heber seemed to take an active pleasure in the young man's frequent presence.

"You *like* him, Willy?" said Bird in a guarded style. "I mean you, yourself?"

And Heber said he did; he felt more drawn to him than had been the case with any other of Clarice's protégés. Claud was so frank and open; a manly, straightforward young man; very intelligent, too; fond of his profession and likely to do well, but without "side" or conceit. Very companionable.

Bird inwardly groaned. Endeavouring to elicit information, he inquired if Landen was an old friend of Mrs. Heber's. "I ask," he explained, "because I don't remember meeting him here until a month ago."

And Heber said that this was quite correct. Claud was a newcomer. Clarice had known his family very well in the past, when Claud was a child; but she had lost sight of them all while the boy was growing up. She had stumbled on him again by accident at the house of other friends.

Then, to his immense relief, Bird heard that Landen's regiment was going to India next September.

"You don't say so?" he cried, startled and delighted, his whole face bright with satisfaction as he turned to Heber. "Is that a fact, Willy?" And in his pleasure he nearly blurted out what he was saying to himself. "A jolly good job, too."

Mrs. Heber spoke of the fact next day, when both the

young man and Wilfred were present—spoke of it with a tenderness and regret that seemed to Bird audaciously reckless.

"Yes, we are to lose him. We must make much of him while he is still with us. September the fifteenth! Oh, less than four months already!"

And she went on to speak of the unrest in India, saying that there was more trouble brewing on the Northwest frontier, and shivering as she said it.

"No such luck, I'm afraid," said the young man, smiling.

"That's cruel of you," said Mrs. Heber, with deep feeling. "And selfish, too, when you know how dreadful it would be for—for all the friends you leave behind you."

"Rubbish," said Heber, looking at the young man benevolently and almost affectionately. "Don't try to put Claud off his game. Naturally he wants the chance of a scrap, but he isn't going to get one."

"I pray not," said Mrs. Heber, with a recklessness that made Bird jump in his chair. "You forget, I know India. I know what frontier wars mean"; and she shivered again.

"My wife will have it," Heber said afterward, "that there's going to be fighting out there this winter. She swears she has a premonition of it—so like a woman, that. But you don't believe it, do you?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. Such ages since I was in the East. Lost touch of oriental politics, Willy, old man."

"Of course I should be awfully sorry if anything happened to Claud. But, on the other hand, if you're a soldier, well——" and Heber made a gesture. "You can't cook an omelette without breaking eggs. And you heard what he said himself? Couldn't hope for such luck. That's the proper spirit, of course."

Landen was going in September. The thing would be stopped in September, anyhow. The middle of September would see the end of the whole dubious affair.

Bird now not only did not want to probe deeper into the mystery of it, he ardently hoped that he might never have a confirmation of his surmises. But always the dread of a disclosure went on increasing. The dread became oppressive, nearly intolerable; he could not escape from it, he could not alleviate its pressure. It was outside the realm of logic or reasoning, it was like an ineradicable superstition; in his very bones he felt that he was destined to discover the ugly truth, that no matter what he did, no matter where he went, the unwelcome discovery would be forced upon him.

She was so careless, so scornfully oblivious of danger. Instinctively, in his shrinking and horror, he coughed outside doors, whistled on the stairs, gave noisy warning of his approach as he moved about the Colwyn Street house. Perhaps, too, it was this queer superstitious dread that impelled him to talk once in an odd way to Mr. Landen. Subconsciously he was craving to put them on their guard. He could have had no real hope of awakening the young man's conscience, although he told himself that this was his aim.

Entering the library he happened to find the young man sitting there alone.

"What, deserted? All by yourself?" said Bird, with an assumption of unconcerned geniality. "Thrown on your own resources?"

"I am waiting for Mrs. Heber," said Landen demurely. "She has gone upstairs to change her dress—and then she is kindly letting me go out to lunch with her."

"Ah, yes. I see," said Bird; and he nodded his head. "*You* are waiting for Mrs. Heber, and *I* am waiting for

Heber. Heber has gone to Hatchard's book-shop in Piccadilly, but he will be back directly. It is Heber, you know, who is *my* friend. I only made the acquaintance of Mrs. Heber in later times—although, curiously enough, it was *I* who brought them together."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Landen.

"Yes. But that's another story. I was saying what a deuce of a time Heber and I have known each other. Good lord, yes, from prehistoric periods. So when I tell you what a real tip-topper Wilfred Heber is—well, I know what I'm talking of." And he launched into lavish praise of Heber, praise to which the young man listened with polite attention.

"You may wonder," said Bird, looking hard at the young man's bronzed cheeks and the line on his forehead where the sunburn ended;—"you may perhaps wonder why I am blowing Heber's trumpet like this."

"No, I wasn't wondering at all," said the young man. "Why should I wonder?"

"I will tell you my reason all the same," said Bird, slightly nettled by the shortness and sharpness of the young man's tone, but restraining himself. "Heber has *taken* to you. He thinks very well of you. Yes, he places you very high in his regard."

"I'm extremely obliged to him," said Mr. Landen; and there was warmth beneath the surface coldness of his words. "But I suppose he didn't commission you to pass on what he thought about me. And that being so——"

Then Bird said more than he intended to say.

"Between you and me and the post, Landen, all things considered, I don't think it's a bad thing that your regiment is under orders for India."

The young man rose from his chair, and joining Bird, who stood on the hearthrug, he begged for an elucidation

of these last remarks. His tone was no longer short, but icily polite.

"What I mean is this," said Bird slowly, feeling that if his object had been to drop a hint he had now fully achieved it, and that it would be well to use a little diplomacy. "You are a soldier by profession, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"And I was thinking things over the other day—when we were all talking of it—and I see the advantages, in a military career, of foreign service. Opportunities, what! At any rate, that's my opinion."

"You are very kind. I should attach more value to your opinion on military matters if you'd ever been in the army yourself."

"Under existing conditions," said Bird, flushing; and the young man interrupted him.

"Under existing conditions, Mr. Bird, I hope you don't think me rude if I suggest that instead of thinking over my affairs, you should attend to your own affairs, if you have any."

Bird thought it disgustingly rude. He was stung by it. He became red in the face, thinking: "Another word and I'll punch his head for him." "Look here," he began loudly; but then he stopped, and drew a long breath. He thought: "If I lose my temper, it's all up. If we have a row, the fat will be in the fire and nothing can save old Willy from twigging." With a supreme effort he stifled his purely personal warmth, and made a pretense of not having noticed the young man's rudeness. After glaring at him, he went on talking with dignified vagueness, and the manner of Landen relaxed. He even smiled at Bird.

In a few moments the peril had passed. Bird was strolling about the room, still talking; and as he talked he was conscious of a strange sympathy with the young man.

He felt again that Landen was by nature honest, and that he would never have entered upon a course of impropriety and deception if he had not been led astray. Quite a paternal note sounded in the voice of Bird; he felt so magnanimous and indulgent as to be almost fond of the misguided youth; he nearly beamed at him.

"Yes. If our acquaintance is very slight, so far, Landen, you will readily understand that, since you are a friend of my greatest friend, well, I can't help taking an interest in you. That is why I have been glad of the chance of this little conversation." He said this with significance; and he was on the point of supplementing the phrase by some such apt proverb as "A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse," when the young man upset him by being rude again.

It was a different sort of rudeness and it annoyed Bird more than the previous sort had done. Mr. Landen's sun-burnt face expressed blank weariness; he produced a just perceptible shrug of the shoulders, languidly put his hands in his pockets, and strolled away toward one of the windows as if except for himself the room was empty. The manner of all this was wholly insufferable; quite alien to the natural Landen, a kind of loutish contemptuousness and overwhelmingly satisfied self-absorption that used at one time to be attributed as usual to the worst type of cavalry officers. He stood at the window softly whistling, and when he spoke to Bird again, without looking round, it was in the careless, patronizing, familiar style that is used by certain very great people when they address omnibus drivers, railway porters, or other social inferiors. "Rainin', isn't it? Goin' to turn out a rotten day. Papers said the glass was fallin'." Then he moved to the big writing table, picked up a book, and sat down—with his back to Bird.

Bird on the hearthrug was breathing hard, and it is impossible to predict what he might have said or done next; but at that moment Mrs. Heber opened the library door and called to her slave.

Mr. Landen, really oblivious of Bird now, not merely pretending, hastened to the slave-maker, to the wicked sorceress, the destroyer of youthful souls. He went straight out, not even shutting the door, just hurrying to the call; with the rapt air that might have been worn by one of those children when the Pied Piper of Hamelin struck up the music of his pipes and they all yielded to the lure. Nobody observing it could misunderstand. At that moment Mr. Landen had forgotten Bird, the army, and every other material phenomenon and nothing mattered to him except the enchantment.

Nevertheless, in due course, he must have told Mrs. Heber about the library interview.

Almost at once Bird saw an alteration in her manner toward himself. The alteration was subtle, very difficult, if not impossible to analyze, as indeed everything concerning her had always been; at first all that she allowed him to infer plainly was a mingled hostility and defiance; but then day after day it seemed to him that she was showing him more and more of her secret, that she was lifting the impalpable veils behind which she had hidden from him during so many years, that she was purposely revealing herself to him. When he stole swift glances at her, if she was aware of his scrutiny she no longer took any pains to compose her face. She let him see all the love in it as she boldly turned to gaze at the young man. When she turned again from him to Bird she flashed a challenge with steadfast eyes, and then curled her thin lips with negligent scorn—or so Bird fancied.

These fresh imaginings of his made him afraid—not only afraid of the elements of danger and distress in the situation that she had created, but of her herself. He thought: "What she wants me to tumble to is that this is not an amorous caprice but a great passion, and she is therefore desperate about it. That being so, it stands to reason that she won't stick at anything."

Sometimes when the young man was there she remained very silent for so incessant a talker; and during the periods of silence there was a remarkable softening of her whole aspect. She looked then, quite suddenly, many years younger. Her complexion seemed to glow with health; it was as though a renewal of life and strength was mysteriously coming to her. Further, while the phase lasted, she would look at Bird with what seemed to be a gentle tolerance.

"Am I going cracked?" he thought once. "There—she is doing it again; looking at me as if she was absolutely fond of me."

At other times, struggling to differentiate illusions from rational deductions, he fancied that he could read in her face neither more nor less than gratitude. Gratitude! He imagined her to be thanking him, to be saying to him, "I am so grateful to you, Mr. Bird. It was sweet of you this afternoon to let me know that Wilfred had come in, when Claud and I were alone in the morning room. But for you, we might not have heard his voice. He might have caught us."

Then on one occasion at least she actually thanked him with spoken words, uttered so that anybody could hear, in the most gracious and benign style.

"Mr. Bird, you are the friend in need who is the friend indeed. You are so considerate. How could we ever get on without you?"

Bird, in the utmost perturbation, murmured his acknowledgments.

"Merciful powers," he thought. "She seems to believe that my opposition is over, that she has won me round to her side, and that I am ready henceforth to act as accomplice, go-between, or anything you like. *What* a woman!"

And now, toward the end of June, about two and a half months before the date fixed for the young man's departure, Bird's trouble was rendered quite unbearable by reason of a new twist that fate gave to the reciprocal relations of this small group of people.

Bird was closely watching Mrs. Heber; and, although he did not know it, for some little while Heber had been closely watching him.

With a terrible unexpectedness Heber tackled him on the subject of his odd behaviour.

"It's no good denying it," said Heber, solicitously but firmly. "At any rate, not to *me*. Dear old chap, you have something on your mind. Won't you tell me what it is?"

Bird, aghast, echoed Heber's words feebly. "Something on my mind?" Then he continued splutteringly, because he tried to laugh and talk at the same time. "Of course not! Where can you have got such a notion from? Ridiculous."

But Heber would not be put off so lightly. He begged Bird to confide the trouble to his old pal; he said that no difficulties are insurmountable if you face them bravely, that two heads are better than one, and so forth; with affection shining from his dark eyes, he made Bird flush and wriggle and cough by the rapid interrogations that followed every negative.

"Has some fool of a doctor frightened you about your health?"

"No, no. Never better!"

"Is it money? . . . Have some of those Stock Exchange fellows at your club let you in badly? . . . Is any one trying to blackmail you? . . . Is it an entanglement with a . . ."

"No, no. Nothing of the kind. Nothing whatever. I assure you."

Heber did not believe this, and, as Bird saw with anguish, he was wounded by the refusal to confide in him.

"If I have appeared to be thoughtful, Willy—or a bit out of spirits—it is due to temperament. That was always my way—up and down. Full of go one day, deuced flat the next. I *am* like that."

"No, but I don't think you are," said Heber. "However, I'll say no more." And he added huffily, "Perhaps I have said too much as it is. The privileges of friendship—as you indicate plainly enough—have their limits."

"Oh, Willy, how can you think I don't appreciate your interest and kindness?"

For a few days Bird, now painfully conscious of Heber's worried air and attentive eyes, enacted a flow of high spirits. But never a talented actor, he found his task often rendered impossible by the demeanour of one member of the audience. Mrs. Heber, although she concealed her mirth from Heber, allowed Bird to detect that she was enormously amused by his efforts.

The acting of course failed. Heber tackled him again; saying in effect that he was determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

He appealed once more to the bond subsisting between them. He implored Bird to be candid. "What's the use of pretending? You are not yourself. I have somehow

upset you. Otherwise, why put me on your black books?"

"Oh, but I haven't."

Heber made a stately gesture. "Honestly I don't know what crime I have committed; but whatever it is, I am very sorry." This was much for Heber to say, and it stirred Bird's tenderest emotions. "I am sorry. . . . Now, racking my brains, I can only think of this. Have I unintentionally rubbed you the wrong way by going about a bit with young Landen—or by praising him as companionable? Surely you must know that I only took him as a *pis aller*—because my Birdie had flown off on his own business and left me." As he said this there was just that slightest possible huskiness, that suggestion of an imminent break in the voice which had overwhelmed Bird every time he heard it. "Am I right? Is that the true reason of the misunderstanding?"

Bird protested that he on his side had never misunderstood. "You're bang off the line, Willie. Take my word, I'm altogether the same."

Then the harrowing expression of regard faded from Heber's eyes, the downward lines showed themselves about his mouth. The wound inflicted upon him by Bird's rejection of the appeal was severe; and, as was his custom, he proudly masked his pain. He spoke fretfully, if not offensively.

He said he gave up guessing and would wait patiently until the answer to the conundrum was vouchsafed to him, as no doubt it would be sooner or later. He said Bird was welcome to be "a death's head at the feast" so far as he was concerned, but, if he were Bird, instead of pulling faces, he would ask a chiropodist to cut his corns, or a dentist to take out his decayed tooth, or a physician to cure him of the belly ache.

Bird, thoroughly scared, thinking "In this temper he

will go on and on till he damned well does find the answer of the riddle," was forced into a rapid decision. "I must go away," he said to himself. "I must go away at once, and keep away till after Landen has sailed and the thing is finished—one way or the other."

Acting with better success than in his recent attempt, he said he would confess everything to Heber.

"Dear old chap, you're so penetrating. I will own that I *do* feel out of sorts. I've been in town too long. I want a breath of fresh air," and wound up by saying he would go and have a blow on the south coast.

Heber, listening, slapped his thigh triumphantly, and his face brightened, almost glowed.

"I *knew* it," he said. And he immediately offered to go away with Bird.

But Bird resolutely declined his company, explaining that he thought he would pull himself round quicker if quite alone.

"Do you really think so? You are not studying my convenience and sacrificing your own inclinations? Say the word, and I'll go like a shot."

Bird, again declining, felt an internal shiver. No, that would be too awful—to play the lady's game for her with such completeness, to remove Heber altogether and give her *carte blanche*.

CHAPTER XVI

HE WENT to Seaford first, then to Eastbourne, Bexhill, Hastings, and Rye, sometimes sending his luggage ahead by train and travelling himself in a char-à-banc, or even using his own sturdy legs and walking from place to place. Although it was a solitary tour, he obtained a sufficient amount of conversation with the strangers that he met at hotel tables or in public conveyances. The fresh air and exercise had a bracing effect on mind as well as body. Under the high blue vault of the summer sky, with wide horizons to gaze at and the broad kindly earth to observe, he seemed to see things in juster, truer proportions. Mrs. Heber seemed less mysterious and abnormal, less paralyzing and terrifying; indeed he thought of her sometimes as almost commonplace. At this distance she had little power over his imagination, as his fear of her decreased his anger against her grew bigger.

Poor old Willy! He sighed heavily whenever he mused about his injured friend; and he frowned as he considered the nature of the injury, the black ingratitude, the poor payment for so much kindness, the remorseless disregard of chivalrous confidence and sincere affection—for there could be no doubt that Willy, in his idiosyncratic way, was extremely fond of her. These thoughts made Bird more and more indignant.

He was eating a hearty breakfast in the quaint coffee room of the Mermaid Inn at Rye when the day's newspaper made him utter a joyous exclamation. "That's the

best news I've had for five years." He said the words aloud, and beamed and nodded at some strangers who looked round, surprised because he was talking to himself. "The very best bit of news"; and he slapped the newspaper, as if patting on the back its editor or military correspondent.

The newspaper told him that because of the menacing state of affairs along our Indian frontiers those in authority had resolved to despatch at once two cavalry regiments that in the ordinary course would not have gone until September, together with three infantry battalions that would not have gone at all but for the need of precautionary measures. The last of these five units was to sail in ten days from now, and probably others might soon follow them.

Mr. Landen's regiment was specifically named.

So in little more than a week all the cause of strain and anxiety would be removed, Heber's domestic peace would no longer be threatened with bomb-shell upheavals.

"Unless of course she does a bolt. And if she does—— But she won't," thought Bird.

Two or three days after this, in peerless weather, he took a long but delightful walk across the downs to get a peep at a new watering-place that had been boisterously advertised throughout the winter and spring. It came into sight just when he had achieved an arduous climb to the summit of a grand headland, and he stood there capless, puffing a little, but with an amused smile, as he regarded the little place stretched out far below his feet, and, thinking of those advertisements, contrasted reality with fiction.

They had promised casinos, piers, what not; they had boldly hinted that Ostend and Deauville must look to their laurels; and here was all that the poor dears could

at present in fact offer one—a large staring hotel and a sea wall, some curbstones lying in the fields, a half-finished terrace of small houses; and, at the back, at the end of a dusty white road, the typical station of a neglected branch railway with a single line meandering into obscurity across flat marshes.

"Simply the back of beyond," said Bird, putting on his cap and beginning the descent. "Blue ruin for the shareholders. What?"

Half an hour later he entered the huge, brand-new hotel, eager for his over-due luncheon.

It was obviously a first-class establishment, everything that a modern hotel ought to be; well-planned and handsomely furnished, the rich treasure of the Tottenham Court Road poured into it with no grudging hand; but one could see at a glance that, in the cant phrase, the public had failed to respond. The hotel staff were grotesquely more numerous than its visitors. Several porters in gold-laced caps welcomed Bird effusively, and he noticed page-boys in maroon-coloured jackets, chief and other waiters standing about a gold screen by the lifts, housemaids chatting on a palatial staircase, many elegant young office ladies doing nothing in a splendid structure of glass and mahogany. He noticed, too, a characteristic of all such seaside hotels, whether new or comparatively ancient. Although the weather had been so calm outside, almost a stiff breeze was blowing within this vast hall. Wooden doors banged with a crash as of artillery; the ponderous glass doors flapped to and fro like the sails of a ship; and from the main entrance there came scudding across the mosaic pavement little brown clouds that settled into thin mounds of sand against the wainscot, while a book that lay upon a settee opened of itself and rustled its pages as if being fiercely read by an invisible

reader. At the remote confines of the hall, perceptible as a vague detail in the immense emptiness, there was a sad little quartette of female musicians. They began to play; and to the sound of a hollow, echoing music Bird was ushered into the gigantic dining room.

It was gigantic in length and height rather than in width, an interminable avenue, a river of little tables with three large islands formed by high buffets that, placed at regular intervals, were laden with masses of unused glass and cutlery. The few guests had been gathered together far down the room in order to make as much display as possible. Bird saw the usual couples of elderly wanderers who finish their lives in hotels, three white-haired spinsters, a family of the Jewish persuasion with nurses and young children; and then, following the head waiter round the third buffet, he saw young Landen and Mrs. Heber.

It seemed to him in the moment of recognition that he had known he would see them there. Anyhow there they were, seated at a table together; Mrs. Heber with a soft, animated face that became pallid, rigid, frozen, as she saw Bird and stretching her hand across the table seized the young man's arm. The young man looked round scowling. Then, before Bird could advance a step farther, Mrs. Heber had recovered herself; short as the distance was, she beckoned Bird gaily, as though urging him to hasten; she smiled at him radiantly.

Bird went straight to them and stood looking down at them. When he spoke he nodded his head ominously; and his words came without effort, simple in sound but terrible in import. He did not make any pretense of being calm, but he was careful not to raise his voice.

"You scarcely expected to meet me here, Mrs. Heber?"

"No, indeed."

"A surprise, isn't it?" said Bird, nodding his head. "Quite a surprise!"

"Yes, but a very pleasant surprise," said Mrs. Heber graciously.

"Ah!" And Bird did what actors on the professional stage call repeating an effect. "You never expected me to drop out of the clouds like this?"

"No, but why didn't you drop out of them sooner? We have nearly finished our luncheon. If you had arrived earlier we could have all fed together."

Bird snorted; and the young man was about to say something, but Mrs. Heber shot out her hand again and touching his arm restrained him. It was exactly as if she had said to him, "No, let me do the talking."

And she talked. She asked Bird questions and ran on again without waiting for answers; just in her usual way. She inquired of Bird what he thought of this seaside resort, and in the same breath informed him that she was herself disappointed by it. She told him that she had come down here for the day, in order to take a furnished house, because she had believed it would be just the place for Janet and Tony during the holidays. Mr. Landen had kindly come down with her, and she would have felt quite lost without him. They had run into this depressing caravanserai for luncheon, and they were running back to London by the next train. That was the tale.

Bird stood motionless, listening. He felt more indignant than ever, but confused, in fact utterly baffled.

"I said to the house-agent, 'No, you are not going to persuade me. I won't take your house.' Don't you think I'm right, Mr. Bird? I shall tell Wilfred that we may go farther but we can't fare worse. Now do go and sit down —or your soup will be cold. Perhaps you don't like soup at luncheon. So funny—they always insist on giving one

soup at hotels for every meal—except breakfast"; and she laughed.

Bird went and nourished himself in distressful silence. Mrs. Heber would have continued to talk to him across the space that intervened between the tables if he had encouraged her. With occasional side glances he saw her bring out her gold cigarette case and light one of her Russian cigarettes at a match held for her by Landen. She threw back her head, and raising her sharp nose high, seemed to be trying to blow rings with the heavy yellowish smoke. Landen with his hands clasped on the table watched her face, entranced. Then, after a very few minutes, she whispered something or gave him a signal and they both went out of the room.

Bird's appetite had of course been completely spoilt; he ate merely to keep alive, and his meal was finished in very little time. Outside in the big hall those gold-laced porters were at last finding work to do in handling luggage—not much work, because the luggage given to them from the lift was not extensive. Bird saw dressing-cases, a kit bag, and one lady-like receptacle covered with a leather cover that bore the initials *C. H.* He had seen that case before. There was a cab waiting at the outer doors; Mr. Landen hurriedly paid his bill over the mahogany counter, showered tips to right and left, and hastened after the baggage; Mrs. Heber, looking very elegant in a fawn dust cloak, with a veiled face and a long streamer of gauze about her neck, came down the broad staircase and passed forth to the open air. And the laden fly drove away.

Bird, fingering his moustache as though it was on fire and had made his cheeks flame, too, presently inquired of one of the young ladies at the office how long Mr. Landen had been staying at the hotel.

"Mr. Landen?" echoed the young lady, as if puzzled.

"Yes—and Mrs. Heber."

"No one of that name, sir."

"Oh, really! My mistake. Some friends of mine—and I fancied I saw them here just now."

"Oh, that was Mr. and Mrs. Handley. They've been here since Friday."

Bird sat down, and wiped his forehead.

Soon he was at the office counter again, learning in reply to further inquiries that the London train would not leave for three quarters of an hour, that there were at least two flies attached to the hotel, and that one of them should now be procured for him.

He drove to the railway station.

It had assumed a factitious vivacity, as if trying to prove that its traffic and commercial importance were considerable. The station-master in his official coat wandered about bustlingly; the single porter was weighing some black boxes that belonged to a travelling pedlar, and the signalman had come down from the signal cabin to assist. Prospective passengers included, as well as the pedlar, a cheerful old farmer, a woman in an apron with a market basket, and the driver of a milk-cart who clamoured for aid in moving some large milk-tins. Everybody knew everybody; all were well-known local residents —except the fashionable lady and gentleman standing near the only seat, close to an advertisement of somebody's famous mustard on a wooden panel that had blistered all over, as if the advertised preparation had entered into the gaudy colours with which it was painted.

"Mrs. Heber, I should like to speak to you, if you please."

Landen interposed hotly and aggressively. "If Mr. Bird has anything to say, let him say it to me."

"No," said Mrs. Heber, "leave us alone"; and with a curious mingling of commands and supplications she made the young man obey her. "Do what you're told. Claud, I ask it as a favour. Go away. Go to the end of the platform—and don't come back till I want you."

Reluctantly, after giving Bird a ferocious stare, he strolled away; and while they talked they could see him standing by the weighing-machine behind some milk-cans.

With a total abandonment of outward forms, speaking as magistrates or policemen speak to convicted prisoners, Bird told her that he now knew everything.

Mrs. Heber, without inquiring what he wished to imply by "everything," asked what he proposed to do about it.

"I shall tell Wilfred."

"Oh, no. Mr. Bird, think. Be reasonable. What can be gained by upsetting Wilfred? And you know perfectly well that he *will* be upset."

"Upset!" cried Bird, becoming for the moment noisy in his just wrath. "Upset! I think so. Is there a man alive who wouldn't be upset by such a communication?"

Then she asked to know exactly what he proposed to communicate.

"I shall tell him that if he wants a divorce he can find the evidence for it by coming down here."

"But, supposing that this were true——"

"It *is* true."

"I don't admit it. But admitting that *you* believe its truth, then your knowledge is an accident. There would be a hideous breach of confidence in using such knowledge. As a man of honour you can't do it."

She appealed to him first as a man of honour, then

as a man of the world. A person of his worldly experience must surely know that harm and not good is the invariable result of interfering between a husband and wife. If you cannot refrain from putting your fingers into other people's pies, at least attack a pie that does not belong to a married couple.

"That is for me to judge," said Bird.

"And if you have any judgment left——"

She also dropped all conventional reticences and politenesses. She looked now haggard and frightened, now reckless and furious; yet beneath her external manner, however often it changed, there seemed to be a state of mere irritation and annoyance that was strangely insufficient for the magnitude of the subject they were discussing—rather as if she had been somebody preoccupied with very serious business being pestered by a stupid, blundering person and thus compelled to waste valuable time.

"When do you mean to tell Wilfred?"

"As soon as possible."

"He is not coming home till late to-night."

"Then I shall tell him to-morrow morning. I didn't know he was away. Where has he been?"

"At Dieppe. I sent him there with Tony. Tony has had chicken-pox, and couldn't remain at school."

"What time do you say he gets back?"

"Not till quite late—whenever the boat train comes in."

And then, still with that harassed air of someone being interrupted in the midst of an important task, she implored Bird to think better of his atrocious plan. She took his hands, squeezed them, brought her veiled face so close as almost to touch his. "Take time. Don't act on the impulse of the moment. Stay here—don't come to London."

Bird declared that no prayers could be of any avail.

Nothing would shake his purpose. He had a duty and he must perform it.

She released his hands, and spoke wearily.

"What have I ever done to you to deserve this? I thought you liked me. Why have you become my enemy?"

Bird said, very simply yet grandly, "I am not your enemy; I am your husband's friend."

"But a bad friend, now that the test has come. A real friend would save his feelings." And her eyes seemed to flash behind her veil; and she laughed in a way that seemed to him shameless, brutal, almost diabolical. "One thing is certain. He may forgive me or not—time will show. But he'll never forgive you. You'll lose your friend, Mr. Bird, whatever happens to me." And she raised her gloved hand and made a signal to Landen, who at once came swiftly toward them.

"Good-bye," she said to Bird. "You'll regret this to your dying day."

He did not wait for the arrival of the train. He walked along the dusty road back toward the sea front. He felt tired, exhausted, and thought that he could not possibly walk over the hills to the town where he had left his portmanteau. He must get a fly and drive there. Even the minor difficulties of the task that lay before him were oppressive—the packing of his things, the explanation of his abrupt departure, the payment of his bill; then the journey to London, an unexpected return to his rooms with nothing ready for him, a sleepless night, and a heavy awakening to-morrow morning. All of that to get through before the real thing, his interview with Wilfred.

He walked slower and slower, thinking very deeply of the manner in which it might be best to deal with poor W. H. He must somehow prepare him for the stroke, lead him toward the hateful truth step by step, do what

is termed beating about the bush. Perhaps he could lock the library door as a hint—"Willy, I don't want us to be disturbed, so if you'll allow me, I'll lock the door." In imagination he could hear himself saying this. Then he might begin by some sort of general reflection. "There are times, old chap, when a man needs all his courage. Such a time has come to both of us, for believe me I feel it just as much as you are going to feel it when you learn from me exactly what it is; because you are the injured party, whereas I am only your loyal old friend who cannot and will not stand by and see you put upon to such an extent. . . ." But Willy would never let him get as far as that without a violent interruption. He could see the growing irritability on Heber's twitching face; he could hear his voice. "Stop this rigmarole. Spit it out. What the devil is it. . . .?" And after that he would have to speak in plain, direct language.

Bird stopped walking and stood still. An invincible shrinking, such as the bravest people may experience before a surgical operation, passed from the surface to the inmost core of him; and he said to himself: "I cannot do it. I simply cannot do it." Then he sat down upon a heap of stones by the roadside and buried his head in his hands, groaning; but thinking all the while that it was but a temporary weakness, and that it would soon go. "I've got to do it. There's no dodging it—worse luck."

The noise of the train made him lift his head. The station was still in sight, and he stared at it dully and stupidly for perhaps five minutes until the whistle sounded and the train went on again. He shook his fist at the train, or at the passenger who had brought him and the man he loved to such dire tribulation.

He thought of Heber's lofty pride and abnormal sensi-

tiveness. He thought of him in that long bygone time after Evelyn Glover had forsaken him. While it lasted it was a collapse, a pathological despair, a state bordering on insanity. And Heber was older now, with less strength to withstand the shock of grief and humiliation. The heart of Bird overflowed with yearning compassion.

"Bother my portmanteau," he said to himself, rising from the heap of stones. "I'll go to London by train—if there is another train from this infernal hole." And he went back to the railway station.

The next and last train of the day would not leave till seven p.m., and its connections were doubtful; no promise of reaching London could be given.

The station had lost all appearance of movement and activity, it had fallen into one of its long pauses, a lifelessness that was like death. The station-master, divested of his official coat, was pasting some bills on a notice board; the signalman had come down the steps of his cabin and was digging in a strip of garden beside the line; the porter had been sent on a message to a village of which some red roofs and the church spire were visible across the marshes about a mile away.

Bird sat then on the seat near the advertisement where he had talked to Mrs. Heber.

And suddenly her final words returned to his mental ear. "You will lose your friend. . . . He will never forgive you. . . . You will regret it to your dying day."

As it had seemed when she uttered them, with such biting scorn, such flashing malevolence, she was actuated by no other motive than the desire to torment him. The words had sounded hatefully, yet with no real meaning in them; they formed an empty defiance—like the exit speech of a baffled villain in a stage play. But now they

became full of import. They were deadly. They froze Bird's blood.

With a new comprehension of all that was happening, he realized that the one person on earth from whom Heber should not learn the truth was himself. Abominable as the revelation must be in any circumstances, it would be ten times worse if it came from the lips of his life-long friend and admirer. Heber would never get over it. Or if he did not die of it, he would never recover from Bird's share in it.

To say that Heber would not forgive him was of course a monstrous libel. Heber, the biggest, the most magnanimous soul that ever linked itself to a human body, would not for the fraction of a second harbour resentment. He would forgive; but it must necessarily be the forgiveness that is accorded when somebody who loves one, meaning to aid, takes from one peace of mind, self-respect, and all that makes life worth living.

He would go on being fond of Bird, but he would never want to see him again; for the mere sight of Bird must revive all the pain and discomfort, the stinging humiliation of the hour in which he learned his conjugal misfortune. However much he struggled against the association of ideas, Bird must be to him an intolerable reminder. This is human nature; and, as Bird thought now, you cannot rise above it—not even a Heber.

And he remembered some more of the woman's words. "You prove yourself a bad friend, now that you are put to the test."

He lit a pipe and began to think philosophically but very sadly. If he did not tell Heber nobody else would. Things would go on much as before—comfortably, so far as Heber was concerned, as long as he remained in ignorance. Heber would never find out for himself.

He puffed at the pipe, and then abruptly laid it down on the seat beside him and sat staring with eyes full of fear, as though he had seen some dreadful object behind the potato patch and the signal cabin.

Mrs. Heber would tell Willy! Inevitably she would tell him when he came home to-night. Such a woman as that does not take things lying down. She has been threatened and bullied, warned in the sternest terms that she would be denounced to-morrow. Then naturally she would not wait till to-morrow. Of course it stood to reason that she would be beforehand with her accuser, and by a subtly artful confession, giving a true report of all the facts that did not matter and lying about all that did, she would try to rob the coming attack of its weight and power. She would confess that she had acted imprudently, confess even that she had placed herself in a compromising position; but she would swear that she was guiltless in thought and deed, appealing to the nobility of Heber's temperament to believe in her spotless innocence. If necessary she would weep. She was up to any trick. She would relate how Bird had met them and behaved in the most outrageous and insulting manner; how he had dared—yes, dared to make base insinuations. "And he intends to repeat them to you, Wilfred. . . ." Then either Heber would believe her or not believe her. If he did not credit her story he would drag the real truth out of her. If he did credit it, he would turn upon Bird with a very righteous indignation and call him to account; and the only way in which Bird could clear his character and put himself right would be by going straight ahead with the revelation. And in either event Heber's happiness would be gone.

The only chance was to get to London in time to prevent her confession.

Gradually and yet swiftly panic fear took possession of him. He had sprung to his feet and he called loudly to the digging signalman and the bill-posting station-master. They hastened to him thinking he was ill, and when he poured forth confused questions, almost raving at them, they thought he was about to have a fit and begged him to lie at full length on the seat. He told them that it had become urgently necessary for him to get to London, that in view of the vital importance of his business, money was no object. Could he have a special train? Why not? In his confusion of spirit he asked them where was Eastbourne, how far off was Rye, could he trust any station within reach to be upon a main line? He had forgotten all he ever knew about these localities. His memory seemed to be paralyzed. "My dear chaps, think for me, help me. Get me out of this God-forsaken place."

The station-master at last said that there was a motor-car belonging to a man named Pritchard at the village over there—and he pointed with his hand to the red roofs and church, which immediately seemed to recede and fade in the dimmest distance. Pritchard habitually hired himself and his car for little excursions about the neighbourhood, but it was doubtful if they had ever attempted so big a feat as the run to London. Nevertheless, since cost need not be considered, Pritchard might be tempted to try—that is, if he happened to be at home. The station-master regretted there was no telephonic communication with the village, and also that he was unable to provide a wheeled conveyance. He proposed that Bird should stroll gently, in the hope that a wagon or tradesman's cart might chance to overtake him and give him a lift.

Bird ran off then, ran till lack of breath stopped him, walked on very fast, and then ran again. He felt that

he had begun a life-and-death race. He was spurred by fear; fatigue and perspiration could not intrude themselves as noticeable facts in a consciousness completely filled by the dominant idea. "Shall I be in time?" he kept saying to himself. "All hinges on me now. It is up to me. Let me make no mistakes"; and he repeated again and again the directions given to him by the station-master. "Past the church—just beyond the forge—a cottage with a shed built all over the front garden. Name—Pritchard."

By a merciful stroke of luck he found Pritchard at home. Pritchard, a thin, pale, asthmatic man with a maddeningly foolish chuckle, demurred, shilly-shallied, consulted his female relatives, and then, yielding to Bird's bribes and entreaties, allowed a treaty to be concluded.

"Right," said Pritchard. "And when are we to start, sir?"

"Now," shouted Bird, stamping his foot. "This minute."

"Right," said Pritchard again.

But they did not start that minute, or for fifty-nine other minutes. It was an hour of mental torture for Bird. After the car had been pulled out into the road and seemed to be ready, Pritchard insisted on making an elaborate toilet, then he required food and drink to fortify himself for his task, and then, after this delay, it was discovered that he was short of petrol. The petrol was locked up, not a possession of Pritchard, and the person who owned the petrol store was somewhere out in the fields. Two boys and a girl were sent to seek him. All the village was now aware that momentous events were in progress; a little crowd of children had gathered, and women came from their cottage doors to look

at the hot, red-faced gentleman in knickerbockers who wished to go to London.

"Most haste, less speed," said Mrs. Pritchard, kindly and sympathetically, as she brought out to Bird a cup of hot tea and a slice of home-made cake.

"Thank you. You're very good. But I can't eat. Yes. . . . I'll sip the tea, if you'll leave it."

They were off at long last; and immediately Bird had the sickening sensation known to hunting men when they ride forth on a hired horse and realize that, although the beast is not lame, there is something wrong with it; that it is dull and lifeless, suffering from influenza or incipient pneumonia, and that the only proper thing for one to do is to take it back to its stable and give up one's day's sport. The car was palpably off colour; if urged, it would break down.

It did, again and again, although not quite so soon as Bird feared.

That journey was too grievously painful to permit of close description; incidents such as the punctured stepney wheel and the loss of the axle nut shall be omitted; brief synopsis must suffice. Pritchard did not know his way—not to London, not to anywhere at all. Bird, sitting beside him and directing him, of course directed him wrong. "I should be all right," said Pritchard, with his foolish chuckle, "if I could hit off the Lewis road." After endless travel, when one would have guessed that they were at least half way to London, Bird glancing around over his left shoulder in a paroxysm of rage and mortification saw the sea glowing expansively beneath the long rays of the western sun. They were still close to the coast.

With dusk the horror of it deepened upon Bird. With darkness and faintly burning lamps it was worse than

the worst sort of nightmare dream. Masses of cloud had filled the sky and come lower and lower, making the night unusually black for the month of June. Whenever a car with real active head-lamps came tearing toward them Pritchard was obliged to stop, lest, dazzled by the glare, he should go into the ditch; and every time he stopped he lost his engine and had to get out and wind up. The unremitting strain had induced a spasmodic tremor in Bird's cramped limbs; his teeth occasionally chattered; his sight from moment to moment failed him, so that the dimly distinguishable perspective of the endless roads seemed to float away sideways or upward into the air. He sat then staring at the darkness, imagining it as a solid wall with somewhere at a measureless distance on the other side of the wall that quiet and as yet unshattered home of his menaced friend. A swelling, melting love rose in him, flooded his eyes and cleared them so that he could see the road again, and murmured piteously, "Willy, I'll save you if I can. I am striving to save you."

"Did you speak, sir?" said Pritchard. "Ah, look. That's better"; and he chuckled complacently.

Straight ahead lay a widely diffused luminous glow—the lights of London, as they both supposed.

They jolted down a long hill, and at the bottom of it something broke and the car gave out for good and all just on the outskirts of the vast town.

But the town was Croydon, not London. Bird ran and walked again; threw himself into a train; and reached his goal in a taxicab.

It was a few minutes past eleven when he stood on the doorstep in Colwyn Street ringing the electric bell. The darkness of the hall, the absence of any light showing from the first-floor windows, the promptitude with which

the butler came to open the door, were all signs that gave him hope; nevertheless his agitation was so great that he could scarcely find breath and nervous strength to utter the fateful question.

"Has Mr. Heber come home?"

"No, sir. But we are expecting him any moment. He and Mr. Anthony have been at Dieppe, you know, sir."

"Yes, I know—I know." Bird was almost fainting. Like a victorious but exhausted competitor in one of those Marathon events that are now so common, he tottered into the hall and sank upon a carved oak bench. When he gasped out his wish to see Mrs. Heber at once the butler seemed to be surprised and doubtful. But, since nothing could safely be denied to this long-established friend of the house, he said he would speak to Mrs. Heber's maid, and after turning on more electric light, he led Bird over the black-and-white marble pavement, up the staircase, into the drawing room.

Bird stood then mopping his brow, suffering a last frenzy of excitement, truly a most incongruous object in that graceful, beautifully appointed room. His hands were blackened, oily; his baggy knickerbockers and stockinged legs bore the marks of travel and adventure; from head to feet he was powdered with white dust, and his warm cheeks and forehead had queer streaks upon them where moisture partially removed the envelope of dirt. These lines or patches changed the whole character of his face, giving it odd, grotesque expressions, so that when Mrs. Heber came into the room he seemed to be jocosely winking at her, although he spoke with tremendous eagerness.

"Mrs. Heber, I want to tell you——"

Dressed in one of her loose, shapeless robes, tawny and spangled like the garb of a wild Afghan woman, she her-

self was at first altogether calm and composed. She immediately grasped the purport of his spluttering announcement that she now had no more to fear from him, and she cut him short before he had finished it.

"You have changed your mind. I'm very glad. I hoped you would." And again she used the grossly inadequate word that had shocked him so much earlier in the day. "What could be the sense of *upsetting* Wilfred? When you know as well as I do that he makes heavy weather of the slightest thing. No, Wilfred is not a person whose feelings one can safely trifle with."

And as if dismissing the subject of their debate now and for ever more, she said that of course Bird would remain in order to welcome Heber.

"No, no—not to be thought of."

"Oh, but please do." She had moved to the hearth, and a thin bare arm came out of her loose wrappings as she sought the button of an electric bell. "I'll tell them to lay a place for you. I'm sure you'll be as glad of some supper as Wilfred and Tony. Then after supper you can have a good long chat with Wilfred. He'll love it."

"No, Mrs. Heber—I beg. No."

"As a favour to *me*, Mr. Bird. Then I can slip off to bed. Not that I shall sleep. Oh, no—but I am so dreadfully tired."

Bird, whom nothing could any longer amaze although it might confound, heard himself as in a dream saying incoherently, "No, please let me off. I can't face Willy to-night. Honestly I couldn't trust myself. I, too, am tired—dog-tired."

Mrs. Heber, moving again from the chimney-place, had come quite close to him, and her next words, spoken over his shoulder, were for the butler.

"Yes, I rang. But it doesn't matter. Mr. Bird won't stay to supper. . . . Stop. You can tell Meadows I'm going to bed."

Then, before the butler had shut the door, in fact while he was still there, she clung to the arm of Bird almost as if embracing him, and he became aware that she was on the verge of a semi-hysterical breakdown.

"I've been brave all day for my poor boy's sake. But, oh, Mr. Bird, if you only knew the anguish of it. I *had* to be brave—hadn't I?—for his sake—not—not to let—let him see," and she was shaken with dry, coughing sobs —"not to see or guess my sorrow and fear."

"My dear Mrs. Heber. Really—Don't, I beg. Try to be calm."

But she went on about her premonition of the Indian war. "I knew it was coming. I said so, didn't I? I told you all. And he's going to it—the poor angel—to danger and death."

"Oh, no. Why take such a gloomy view?" As he said this he was endeavouring to get her to the nearest sofa. "Bless me, we don't even know yet there'll be any war at all."

"Find out for me"; and she clung to him closer than before. "Mr. Bird, do they know at the clubs? There may have been late news. Mr. Bird, be kind—have pity. Go round to your club and find out—and telephone to me. Telephone. I don't mind if it's in the middle of the night. I sha'n't be asleep. Oh, no, I sha'n't be asleep."

Murmuring fatuous encouragements, Bird seated her on the sofa and released himself from her clutch. He did this with difficulty, and the moment he succeeded she went all limp and slack, nearly falling over. He restored her to as comfortable an attitude as might be, getting her

well supported and arranging her arms and hands on each side of her. Then he stole toward the door. From the opened door he looked round at her. She had preserved the pose that he had given to her, with her head right back and her eyes closed; but her whole body trembled, and she was making slight sounds like hiccoughs.

"Send Meadows to me," she whispered faintly, without opening her eyes.

"Yes, I will. I will. I promise."

He gave the message, and then hurried away from the house.

CHAPTER XVII

LIFE resumed its ordinary character. Mr. Landen and his regiment had gone from these shores; Mrs. Heber in accordance with custom went to Homburg; and her husband and Bird enjoyed their usual six weeks at Beach End.

But during this holiday Bird was haunted by thoughts of Mrs. Heber, meditating about her as a danger with which they had not finished; guided by his unerring *flair* for the obvious, comparing her in his mind to a volcano that had very nearly erupted and buried everybody under streams of molten lava. As proved by history, in the neighbourhood of volcanoes you can never consider yourself to be really safe. Long after they are supposed to be extinct they do it again. No, he could not dismiss the lady from his reflections.

Moreover, for the first time Heber talked about her confidentially, although not with anything approaching to complete confidence. He said he was worried in regard to her health—also this increasing thinness, this incessant desire for excitement, this restless pursuit of childish pleasures. After a certain age that sort of thing ought to be dropped or it might wear one out. And he asked Bird how old he thought she was.

"Oh, I couldn't say. Not as young as she used to be. But, of course, that applies to all of us."

Heber, laughing fretfully, declared that only Bird could have said anything so sublimely trite. Then he

shrugged his shoulders, and with a gesture commanded silence.

But, later, he startled Bird by another and deeper confidential dive. He said that Mrs. Heber did not possess the maternal instinct, that she neglected her children.

"Where are they now, Willy?"

"Oh, in the charge of strangers, of course. Being paid for—being pushed away, out of sight, in any background that comes handy at the moment. Clarice said that she would take a furnished house and look after them herself; but it ended in smoke. I do what I can. But I can't be saddled with them perpetually."

And he spoke of their paternal grandfather and grandmother, Sir Lionel and Lady Denham, wealthy people living in Yorkshire. Bird, who had never heard of this old couple before, listened with much interest. Heber said they had quarrelled with, or if that was too big a word, they had become estranged from Clarice soon after her marriage to their son. "I don't know what about," he added.

Bird thought he could make a good guess, but said nothing.

Now, it appeared, the old people were anxious for a reconciliation. In fact, they wished to adopt the children and have them permanently at the place in Yorkshire. Heber, considering the best interest of the children, thought that the offer should be welcomed, and he asked Bird to assist him in winning round Clarice to the acceptance of an idea which at present she rejected.

When Bird said that he felt shy of obtruding his opinion Heber made him blush apprehensively by saying, "You may have more influence with Clarice than you suppose. Of late I have often noticed an unusual sym-

pathy—at least on her side. To use the spiritualists' language, you are *en rapport*."

Bird was deeply interested by all this. He, as well as Heber, thought it would be a very good thing for Janet and Tony.

In October, when everybody was back in London, the aged Sir Lionel and his equally aged wife came to Colwyn Street one afternoon; but, as Heber reported, no progress was made. Clarice refused to entertain their proposition; indeed she showed no kindly feeling to the visitors.

"I wish you'd speak to her about it, Birdie."

Bird mumblingly said that he would try to do so.

He was afraid to speak to her about this or anything else; for now the fighting had begun on the Northwest frontier and her feverish anxiety was a replenished source of danger. Bird felt that the earth trembled and steamy wreaths hung above the crest of his metaphorical volcano; an eruption might occur any day. As much as possible he avoided solitary interviews with her. Even in her husband's presence she asked him for news of the East and said things that kept him on tenterhooks. Had he any friends at the War Office—or at the India Office? Did he happen to know personally any member of the Government?

It was one of those old-fashioned, comfortable small wars in which England used to engage with such a light heart. The public knew little about it and cared less. It was only mentioned in Parliament occasionally by a minister answering a question. Unless for an individual private reason, nobody watched or thought about its development. But in Colwyn Street, of course, there were individual and very private reasons.

Heber spoke of it at meals, in the easy tone of an interest that is untinged with alarm.

"I wonder if our young friend Landen has been in action yet."

"Yes, he has," said Mrs. Heber; and Bird looked steadily at the tablecloth.

"How do you know?" asked Heber. "I haven't seen the cavalry mentioned."

"He told me so."

"Oh," said Heber, "have you heard from him again? Let me read his letter some time"; and he raised his glass. "Here's luck to him! . . . I liked Landen—and I *miss* him. I really miss him. . . . Now then, Birdie. Apple tart or caramel pudding?"

Bird was on tenterhooks.

Another day, at luncheon, Heber said frowningly and querulously, "I don't altogether like the look of things out there. I hope we aren't going to make the usual mess of it. Did you see that letter in the *Times?* Casualties seem to be very heavy—that is, if we're doing as well as they pretend."

Bird felt that the apple tart was going to choke him after he had glanced at Mrs. Heber's face.

In a moment it had assumed that earthy or ashen colour that it used to have years ago. The eyes seemed to have sunk—almost it was like the face of a dead woman. She got up and went out of the room, while Bird talked loudly and wildly to distract Heber's attention. It appeared incredible that Heber noticed nothing more than *oddness*, and could attribute those and other phenomena to a poor state of health.

"What was I saying, Willy? Oh, yes, I have it. Look here. If you can drop in on me this evening I want your advice—about—about two prints that I've seen at that corner shop in Piccadilly. Done from pictures, you know. A windmill in summer; and the same scene in

winter, with the snow all over everything. Rather jolly! Yes, summer and winter—new idea, I think."

One foggy but frostless morning, at the end of November, Heber came from his library to the outer hall to meet Bird on his arrival. The fog pursuing the visitor into the house invaded the staircase, and Bird was facetious about the bad weather, refusing at first to take off his big overcoat and slapping his chest with both arms and pretending to be a cabman who had been paid less than his due fare. But Heber did not laugh at these drolleries. He drew Bird with him to the library and in silence closed the door behind them. Then Bird noticed that he was looking bilious and dejected.

"What's the matter, old chap?"

"One of those hateful and disgusting things has happened," said Heber, very gloomily—"the sort of thing that sickens one because there seems no reason for it—except sheer, damnable bad luck. . . . Young Landen has been killed."

"Killed!" said Bird. "You don't say so."

"Yes. Shot through the heart."

They stood looking at each other blankly, for a moment or two scarcely aware of each other. The library had become very quiet—with a stillness that seemed to have crept into it from outside, from an immense distance, from the confines of the earth. The room itself had changed, too; it seemed unfamiliar, not to belong to Heber or to anybody else—unless to this tremendous, impalpable presence that had stalked through the shrouded streets, and, halting here, now towered upward to the invisible sky. Bird, confronted thus with the majesty of death, had a perception of smallness, of nothingness in regard to marriage vows, guilty loves, and all other

human affairs. Then he moved his shoulders and jerked his head.

"Shot, Willy? Through the heart!"

Heber put his hands in his pockets and walked about the room. "Yes," he said sombrely. "Dashed bad luck, isn't it? Poor beggar—just on the threshold—a glimpse of the prospect of life—and the iron door closes in his face, shutting out the high hills and the pleasant valleys, the sky, the sun, the universe. A snap—no more than the click of a photographer's shutter—perhaps a sensation of darkness, and henceforth it is as if there had never been such a person as Lieutenant Claud Landen of the Fourth Lancers. Something pitifully like him is sprawling across the rocky path, or has rolled over the edge and lies among the boulders in the stream below; but our brother officer has gone from us for ever."

"Exactly what I was thinking," said Bird. "Only I couldn't have expressed it like that. I never heard anything so beautifully expressed—I mean—not even in books"; and he blew his nose.

"Well, there it is," said Heber, in the same tone; then, speaking abruptly, "Clarice is quite broken up by it. She was very fond of the boy."

Bird did not see her for a fortnight. She had been in bed all that time, with a doctor regularly attending her. But at last her place was laid for her on the luncheon table, and Bird, pointing, said he was glad to see it.

"Yes," said Heber, "Clarice is coming down to-day. We'll wait for her, if you don't mind."

And they waited for a few minutes, with the butler and footman standing by all the covered dishes on the sideboard.

"Oh, let's sit down and begin," said Heber, rather testily. "What have you got over there?"

"Roast mutton," said the butler, uncovering the dishes, "and fricasseed chicken."

Then soon she came in. Bird jumped up to pull out her chair, and nearly uttered a cry; her aspect was so shocking to him. It was not only that she looked almost an old woman, she seemed so weak, so abnormally thin, so devoid of blood and colour and life.

Although he promptly recovered himself and began to chat very gaily, he could not conceal the pity with which his first glance had been eloquent, and he knew that she had seen and recognized it. She said a few words now and then. But the two men had to keep up the talk.

At the end of their meal, when the servants wanted to brush the bread crumbs off the tablecloth, she motioned them away. She was doing something with the crumbs herself, slowly sweeping those in front of her into long thin lines. The slow movements of her fleshless hand fascinated Bird; he could not turn his eyes away, and as long as he watched his pity for her was growing deeper. She drank coffee but refused to smoke. She sat there, silent altogether now. Heber went on talking; and Bird was thinking, "My word, she *has* taken the knock. Down and out. Not worth counting." They left her still seated at the table, alone in the room, when Heber took his friend away.

At the end of the passage, by the library door, Bird made an excuse to go back—"One moment, Willy. My cigarette case!"

He hurried into the dining room, went to her, and touched her.

"Mrs. Heber, I'm so sorry—so dreadfully sorry."

She could not speak. She gave a sob and without looking at him held out a cold hand, which he pressed.

Indeed Bird felt sorry for her. She was so utterly forlorn, so completely crushed by grief; and he, understanding or believing that he understood the exact nature of her mental state, thought: "That escapade was the biggest thing that she has ever passed through. It was the last passion of a very passionate woman; and she feels now that all is over with her, and that life can hold no more for her—at least of that sort of thing." He continually thought of her thus, as worn out, burnt out, soon to become the ugly ruin of what she once was; a person who would, of course, remain female in sex, but who, having lost the attributes that charm and seduce, could never cause uneasiness to anybody. Thinking of her in this manner, he felt a large tolerance for her past shortcomings as well as regret for her present condition.

He took an opportunity of expressing his earnest wish to help her if it lay in his power to do so.

"Mrs. Heber, please command me if there is anything that I can do for you."

"No," she replied brokenly. "Only Wilfred! To—to fill up his time—so that I can be alone as much as possible."

At this period Heber used often to say, "What *is* the matter with Clarice?" And he talked of her health, becoming painfully medical in the description of his surmises. He had summoned another doctor, because the first one did not seem to understand the case, and he told Bird that in his opinion the patient wanted *rousing*. She who used to be always dashing about London had now gone to the other extreme and moped indoors all day long. "I can quite understand her having been upset"—and Bird winced at the sound of the peculiar word which had been used in relation to Heber himself—"yes, badly upset by the death of that poor lad. It was a

shock to her. It was a shock to me. But she has somehow muddled it up with that superstitious nonsense of having known all along that it was going to happen. She speaks of it as if we had been mysteriously warned and ought therefore to have prevented it. How the devil could we—even if all the spooks between here and the moon had warned us? Claud was a soldier. He couldn't have asked to exchange into another regiment because his own was ordered on active service. Do talk to her, Birdie, and try to get such irritating rubbish out of her mind. Tell her, if you like, that it's on my nerves." And, making Bird wince again, he spoke about the deterioration of her appearance. "She neglects herself—and you know how particular she used to be. She doesn't dress adequately. And have you noticed her hair, and the way she does it now—or, rather, doesn't do it?"

It was while she continued in this crushed state that she consented to give up the children. She seemed now glad to let them go, and suggested of her own accord that Heber should arrange for them to proceed directly to Yorkshire instead of coming home for their Christmas holidays.

With Bird he went to Harrow to tell the news to Tony, and thence to Janet's finishing school at Sunningdale to repeat the news there. Tony seemed well satisfied with the arrangement; but Janet merely stared. "She always did," said Bird. "It is a habit. But it doesn't mean, I'm sure, that Janet hasn't a warm heart, too, and isn't very clever into the bargain. See how beautifully she plays the piano."

He and Heber, dining that evening at the club, agreed that the adoption by the grandparents was "a jolly good thing."

They were always together nowadays. When Bird

was not at the Colwyn Street house, you might be sure to find Heber at Bird's rooms in Half Moon Street just around the corner.

Bird, desirous to keep Heber occupied on Mrs. Heber's behalf as well as on his own, at last persuaded him to take up riding again. Mr. Milton of Park Lane provided them with steady hacks, and, this winter being what hunting men describe as open, there were few mornings on which they might not have been seen issuing from the livery yard and entering the park side by side at Stanhope Gate—the two traditional horsemen of the old story books; one tall, dark, dignified, and rather silent, the other short, stout, and very loquacious; the romantic knight and his more matter-of-fact companion; or, with a slight stretch of the imagination, that pair of pairs, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Bird, for whom the exercise of riding ever had an exhilarating effect, was sometimes almost light-headed from sheer pleasure. He babbled ecstatically as they trotted or cantered among all the other people who were there for the good of their livers.

"Jolly to be on a horse again, eh, Willy? Nothing like it—and never will be. Takes an inch off the tummy and a ton of bricks off the mind. Ha-ha. Begone dull care. Shall we shove along? . . . Listen, and I'll tell you a funny thing." Often Bird started a funny thing at one end of the run and had not finished it when he reached the other end. "As soon as you cottoned to the idea of throwing your leg over a horse again, I thought I'd fish out a pair of my old riding boots that I'd purposely kept by me. Knew they were somewhere. . . . Four or five wooden packing-cases—nailed down—tight as—coffins." When Bird cantered, his narratives tended to become less smooth and flowing than when he merely

trotted, and he was now cantering. "Of—course—in the very last case! Shall we have a breather? . . . Well, then, got 'em out; but—would you believe it?—*mildew!* Mildew all over 'em. Fungoid growth, my dear fellow. Ha, ha—mushrooms and toadstools, what! Jones said he'd see if he could clean 'em. Useful chap, Jones—my landlord, you know—but, of course, you know. By the way, he tells me he began as third footman with Lord Andover at Cranes Park. Fact! That carries one back, doesn't it? You haven't forgotten old Andover when we hunted with the Vine? Ha, ha. I rode into him one day—and how he cursed me! Swore like a lord—and used to drink like one, too, so Jones says. . . . But the boots—I'm telling you about the boots. When Jones brought 'em up to me, they simply looked *new*. They might have come straight from Peel's or Taylor's. 'By Jove,' I said, 'give me the boot-hooks.' And then, what do you think? Guess the finale."

Heber was smiling at him, ironically but fondly.

"You couldn't get your legs into them, Birdie."

"Right," cried Bird delightedly. "You've hit it in once. My calves would no more go into those boots than a quart will go into a pint pot. Ha-ha-ha."

But even in his most joyous moments, whether on horseback in the Row or far afield with golf-stick in hand, he was conscious all the time of the silent Mayfair house and the wretched, unhappy woman in it. That figure of unmitigated woe haunted him always. In his own pet phrase: There it was, and he couldn't really get away from it.

He did all that he could for her.

Then, after a time, the strain was lightened for him by his recognition of the obvious fact that she was trying to pull herself together. She made brave efforts to shake

off the dark cloud, and he felt a strong admiration for her courage. She dressed less sloppily, she went to Mundie's to fetch new novels, she forced herself to evince interest in the common affairs of life. And soon after this stage had been reached he seemed to see quite plainly that she was turning toward her husband, and seeking from him the comfort of present affection and the hope of future peace. Bird was greatly touched by this.

Again he thought he could understand the natural impulses of her lacerated heart. In her loneliness and grief, in the remorse that inevitably follows wrong-doing (more especially when one is too old to go on doing wrong), there had arisen in her a new regard, if not exactly a new love, for dear old Wilfred. Or it might be—and Bird sometimes suspected it to be the case—that she had almost entirely lost W. H.'s affection and she was now desperately trying to win him back. Without the least doubt she was wooing him.

Bird helped her in this, too. He tacitly applauded her, encouraged her with a beaming sympathy, and sought in as tactful and delicate a manner as he could achieve to soften Heber and induce him to respond more generously to all these very pathetic advances. The fact was that Heber did not respond. Bird was a little shocked by his hardness, and on one occasion gently pleaded with his friend, pointing out, after a few generalizations as to the duty of "the stronger partner" in the marriage contract, that formal courtesy and frigid kindness are insufficient when a wife, as is her right, appeals for something more tender and sustaining.

Heber, evidently bothered, although not taking offence, shrugged his shoulders and murmured words to the effect that it was a little late in the day for the introduction of such sentiments as Bird was describing.

"Oh, no," said Bird. "And don't, my dear old boy, think that I'm *preaching*. Good gracious, no, that would be like my cheek, eh? In fact, I wouldn't have ventured even to whisper a hint—only I do so well remember how I used to think, when sometimes my poor Amy and I didn't quite hit it off——" He paused, slightly overcome. "Well, I thought that years and years hence, if I allowed anything like an estrangement to widen, and didn't patch it up quickly—— But you twig my meaning, Willy?"

"Oh, quite," said Heber, very gloomily.

Then soon, on a never-to-be-forgotten night, when Bird arrived for dinner, Mrs. Heber unexpectedly took all the game into her own hands and no further assistance was needed.

Bird was surprised to find his friend in a white waistcoat and tail coat instead of the usual black tie and dinner jacket; and Heber had surprised him much more by explaining that it would be necessary to hurry through dinner because he had promised to take Clarice to the theatre. Then, the next moment, she came sweeping into the drawing room and struck them both speechless with surprise.

She had dressed in a style that was at once gorgeous and daring—but there was far more than that to it. Her cheeks were pink and white, her lips bright, bright red. *She had painted herself.*

It should be remembered that when Bird last saw her, only a few hours ago, she had no colour at all; and thus, when she came in at the door, he was totally unprepared. The absolute audacity of the thing took his breath away. It seemed to him that no actress behind the foot-lights had ever "put it on" with such profusion. Those broadly

smeared scarlet lips had the sort of defiant contempt of nature's laws that should only be shown by a clown in a circus. This was Bird's first impression.

Still tongue-tied, he saw that Heber after a shuddering recoil had drawn farther and farther away from her. Fumblingly, like a person who has been blinded as well as rendered dumb, he seemed to be trying to find the bell and ring it for dinner.

Dinner was announced.

"Mr. Bird," she said, smiling at him, "don't you intend to give me your arm?"

Directly she slid her thin white hand upon his coat sleeve he became conscious of a penetrating, but by no means unpleasant, perfume; and as they moved toward the door he thought, "By Jove, this new scent of hers is going through and through me. I sha'n't get it out of my clothes for a fortnight."

Passing through the hall she looked back at Heber archly, and said to the guest, "I don't know how to apologize for taking possession of my husband in this unceremonious fashion. But the whim only seized me after tea. I felt I *must* see this play at the Criterion that everybody is praising. And now you're going to have a horrid scratch meal, instead of the sort of long, comfortable dinner that you enjoy."

Bird said something painfully like "Don't mention it"—not quite that, but nearly as bad.

They sat down; and while urging the servants to topmost speed, she talked as she had not talked for ages, rattlingly, laughingly, filling the room with her excitement.

"A sudden fancy! So I went to Wilfred—the troublesome child approaching the stern and aloof master. He was frowning and glum—oh, he was glum";

and she laughed. "But like the very great dear that he really is, he said 'Yes.' "

Bird drank a glass of champagne and felt better. He noticed that Heber, after that recoil upstairs, now looked at his wife with increased interest, and, although still astounded, seemed to be amused. A strange smile, half ironical, half amicable, played about his eyes and lips. Bird, turning again to the lady, found that he himself was already growing accustomed to the transformation that she had wrought in her appearance.

After all, paint is paint; and, not altogether incongruously, he remembered the painted ladies that he had seen in Paris, at boulevard restaurants late at night. They did it in Mrs. Heber's way—no half measures, just turning their faces into pretty masks. He remembered also how "a knowledgeable chap" out there had told him that these French artists of easy virtue, or no virtue at all, are sometimes fabulously old; that they have been known to frequent the same restaurant for thirty or forty years at a stretch; and that Frenchmen don't mind—accepting the unchanged bloom of youth as the genuine article, refusing to count the years, never looking beneath the disguise. He stared very hard at the chattering hostess as he asked himself Heber's question. How old was she really? If you accept the paint, she looked not a minimum forty-five, but maximum twenty-three—a naughty, dangerous, wickedly alluring twenty-three. "She *is* the limit," he thought. "Undefeatable! What!"

Very brightly and playfully, she was still talking about the evening's treat. "I didn't give him time to change his mind. Mr. Bird, you should have seen me rush to the telephone; you should have heard me shouting: 'Criterion, is that you! I want two orchestra stalls for to-night.' "

Till that moment Bird supposed that he was to be dragged to the theatre with them; he had not guessed that they could mean to leave him out in the cold. The gross inhospitality of her arrangement wounded him sharply. He thought, "You ask a fellow to dinner, make him bolt his grub as if he was catching a train, and then leave him stranded for the evening. A bit thick, eh?" Not that he wanted to go to the theatre. It was her unkindness in not wishing to take him there that had made the smart.

"Ha-ha." He gulped another glass of wine, and was able to speak good-humouredly and magnanimously, even to feel all right again. "Topping idea of yours, Mrs. Willy. Splendid of you. I'm so glad. Delighted."

In regard to the too hasty meal she apologized to him several times, but her apologies were distasteful. She said such things as "It *is* a shame. . . . Poor Mr. Bird. . . . But you must come another day, quite soon. . . . Yes, we owe you a proper dinner, and you sha'n't be defrauded. I promise that the debt shall be paid"; almost seeming to imply that he came there only to eat, that he was notoriously fond of his food, a good trencherman and so forth. It was all very playful and sparkling as she said it, but so infernally rude if you analyzed it or thought about it afterward.

And Heber didn't improve matters by saying, as stupidly as affectionately, "Birdie must have a special menu, to make up. He must choose his own favourite dishes, Clarice."

In the weeks that followed the theatre-party, she harped delicately yet with maddening offensiveness on Bird's powers as a wielder of knives and forks. She assumed that it was a well-known joke among the three of them, and Bird was sometimes very short and firm in rebutting her light

chaff. Then she was rude to him for a moment or two, and then in the next moment so caressing that he thought he had been mistaken.

But, of course, he could go on mistaking for ever. She sent him brief invitations in her own hand and cancelled them by the voice of a servant on the telephone. Abruptly, at the very last moment, she came between him and Heber in any plans they made for themselves. "Mr. Bird," she would say, with her damnably treacherous smile, "again you see the penitent at your feet. I am compelled to borrow Wilfred from you for the whole of to-morrow."

Subtly she changed his status at the house; and she made the servants treat him differently; where he had been so comfortable for years he felt nothing but discomfort. The very chairs and sofas received his solid form less hospitably; no longer yielding to him and adapting themselves to him, but telling him to sit up straight and not take any liberties with them. Some order of the mistress impeded or interfered with his slightest actions. If he picked up a book to read, Meadows the maid mysteriously appeared and said Mrs. Heber required it. If he was about to open a door without permission, the butler asked if he would mind going into another room instead, because that particular room was to be cleaned or have its chimney swept. He had ceased to be the privileged friend of the house; he had become merely its hanger-on; he was only there on sufferance.

And Heber, apparently unconscious of all that was occurring, did nothing to protect him.

One day when Bird, after fresh outrages, left the house, he felt smartings and prickly irritations all over him, as if he had been swimming in a tepid sea that was full of poisonous jelly fishes, and he decided upon very drastic

conduct. He said to himself, "I shall stay away altogether, and when W. H. asks me why, I shall tell him plainly that his wife's treatment of me has made it impossible to go there."

He adhered to this decision—and Heber did not say a word about it. Not one single question was asked by Heber as to why their constant visitor had entirely ceased to visit them. Bird thought: "It is because he knows that least said is soonest mended. He is powerless against her. She has told him that she doesn't want me there and she's deuced glad that I have disappeared."

Heber was as fond of him as ever, he came to see him and occasionally they dined together at the club; but he had changed, he was not quite the same, or rather he was like what he used to be soon after his marriage. He was as much under his wife's thumb as he had been then. She had got him again, and she could do what she pleased with him.

And Bird, although mortified, loyally endeavoured to feel glad, thinking: "After all, I *wished* them to come together again. No doubt it is the best thing that could have happened. I myself worked to bring it about." With very real generosity, he tried to put himself in Mrs. Heber's place and think of what she must be thinking. Now that she had regained her husband's regard she wished to forget the past and everything that should not have been in the past. But Bird *knew*. His presence reminded her of it painfully, just as it would have reminded Heber if he had opened Heber's eyes. "Yes," he thought; "but she might have given me the tip; she needn't have been ungrateful and insolent about it. See how I've tried to help her. She knows I have been her friend from the word 'Go'—or nearly from the word 'Go.' I shouldn't have felt it if she had done it decently. No. If she

had told me, slap out, like a man——" And he laughed ruefully. "But of course she isn't a man."

Heber had stopped riding. Now he began to break the few appointments that he made, and presently Bird detected that Heber was seeing him by stealth, without Mrs. Heber's knowledge. He had a harassed, guilty air; he came into the rooms at Half Moon Street at odd hours, quite unexpectedly, and hurried away again with feeble excuses. It was exactly as it had been in those far-off days when Bird used to escape from home at any chance and meet Heber on the sly—in those far-off days when this secrecy had been forced upon him after Mrs. Bird's decree that they were never to meet each other again.

Bird really saw, yet tried not to see, what was coming. It came one evening toward eleven o'clock, when Heber, arriving in faultless dress clothes with a white flower that drooped from his buttonhole, asked for a few moments' quiet talk. Despite the fashionable youthful garments, he had a hang-dog air, and he walked about the sitting room unable to keep still or to look Bird in the face. He told Bird in effect that he was very sorry, but Clarice would not any longer permit their friendship. She had said that she could not share him with his friend.

"You see," said Heber, humbly and haltingly, "it's what you put to me yourself. One has duties. After all, she *is* my wife."

"Oh, you're quite right," said poor Bird, with a supreme effort. "You have no choice."

"Well, I suppose I *have* no choice."

"No, old man, you've no choice."

CHAPTER XVIII

SO THIS had been his reward. He was irrevocably banished, not only from the house but from the orbit of Heber's dark and troubled eyes. He wrote in his diary: "FRIENDSHIP. Put not your eggs in one basket," and added the three notes of exclamation (!!!) which from long habit and the webbed links of associated idea seemed to him to be more pregnant with meaning than any mere words.

Heber had failed him, and he possessed no other friends. All those good fellows at the club had been renounced for Heber. Vincent, a real tip-topper; Cardew, who quite liked him; Brown, Jones, and Robinson—any of these might have ripened into a bosom friend; but instead of cultivating them, he had neglected them for Heber's sake. He had even dropped Smythe. His must be henceforth the worst sort of solitude, to be alone in a crowd of acquaintances; for it was too late now to alter established conditions. When you are well on in life, you cannot turn to men whom you have known casually for decades and ask them to admit you to their hearts and hearths. If you attempted such a thing they would think you had "gone potty."

Two years passed by.

They were terrible to Bird in their blankness. He travelled a good deal, and at a later period would sometimes hint that he committed excesses in continental cities; but truly these years were as blameless as they were void and dull. In the winter of 1913 he was back in London,

staying with Mr. Jones of Half Moon Street and occupying the same rooms as before. Now on the last night of the year, when all the world except himself seemed to be making merry, he sat alone by the fire to listen for the sound of bells and welcome, with what courage he could muster, the apparently innocent little stranger that crept nearer every minute—the baby year that was to be called 1914.

Quite early in the evening the maidservant who aided Mr. and Mrs. Jones had brought up a siphon of soda water, poked the fire, and asked if he would be wanting anything else. She explained that she herself was going to a party at the house of relatives, and Mr. Jones was giving a party down below in the basement. Mr. Jones, she said, sent up his compliments and begged Mr. Bird's forbearance should any unseemly noise ascend as far as the second floor. Mr. Jones would try to keep his guests quiet, but there were young people among them.

"Young people," said Bird mechanically. "Yes, that's all right, Doris. Hope you'll enjoy yourself. Goodnight."

He smoked his pipe, and meditated. After a while he was vaguely conscious of the noise of Mr. Jones's festival as it rose from the depths—faint screams or shouts, the music of a concertina, the muffled thudding of many feet. Young people! Yes. He thought: "I am fifty-one. Before this year ends I shall be fifty-two. A pretty bad affair, anyhow, when a fellow has passed his fiftieth birthday, what! Not much before him then. Yet I *feel* young—I mean, in myself. If I never looked in the glass, if nobody jogged my memory, I could believe I was a boy still." And his thoughts became philosophical and poetical, exhausting the obvious, groping through the wardrobe of imagination's worn-out clothes. He thought

how wonderful life is, how like a game, how like a dream. And always these tiny years advancing to meet you, innocent kindly infants that grow big, get behind you, and are gone—one after another, until at last a new-comer carries a weapon in its hand, and *kills* you. The end of the dream—unless one begins again with another, a different dream. Thinking of this, he felt the instinctive, elemental revolt of the ego. He had no conceit of himself, he had always wished that he was a little taller and less stout; he had yearned for brilliant gifts, had sometimes hated himself for not being quick-witted, clever, really dashing; but a second life in which he himself did not persist, in which he could be essentially this very Bird, would be no use to him—no use whatever. No . . . Young people! If one had children, that, in another way, would carry one on. One would live in them again. And grandchildren—a little farther still. Great-grandchildren. . . .

The bells were ringing. He got up, opened his window, and listened to them, very soft at first, mingling with the vulgar sounds of Mr. Jones's party, then joyous and clear. The street was empty—not a policeman, not a cat; only lighted windows here and there, murmur of festivities, and the voice of the bells filling the dark sky.

He left the window open and returned to his chair; and soon the metal tongues of the bells grew weak, the music that they made grew faint, ceased.

"Whose will be the first foot across the threshold?" And he thought, not bitterly but very sadly, of the old superstitions. "Who's going to trouble to bring me luck in the New Year? Doris—or the milkman? . . . I might be dead already, for anything it matters to anybody."

Then he became aware that the knocker of the front

door was being loudly beaten, and no doubt, although he could not hear it, the front doorbell being rung. The street had not long remained empty. "And the first foot has soon arrived," he thought as he listened to the knocking and wondered if Mr. Jones was too much engrossed in his party to go and open the door.

"Who the devil can it be? Not that first-floor chap, because he's away."

Bird went to the window, and looking down saw that it was a man in a big fur coat. The man apparently was looking upward to the top of the house as well as banging on the door; for at sight of Bird, framed like a picture in the bright light of his window, he called out loudly and beseechingly.

It was Heber.

"Birdie, come down and let me in."

At the same moment Mr. Jones opened the door; and Bird, hurrying to the stairs, met Heber slowly mounting them. He helped him to take off his fur coat, noticed that he was wearing morning clothes, and pushed an easy chair near to the fire. Heber immediately sat in it and stared at the fire. He said nothing, but presently shivered.

Bird closed the window, and returning to the hearth, stood there looking at Heber's half-averted face. Too evidently the old chap was in some great trouble or affliction; he was haggard, slightly dishevelled, with collar limp and tie riding high at the back of his neck; his whole attitude—the shoulders hunched up, the head drooping forward, the hands hanging loose—spoke of unmitigated woe, and roused the deepest and tenderest memories in Bird's heart. Every now and then a shiver ran through his whole relaxed body, and his mouth was twisted awry, as of a person who suffers from the after-

taste of some disgusting or poisonous food. At last he spoke.

"I have done with that woman for ever."

"What woman?" said Bird, knowing, of course, but feeling that politeness rendered the question a necessity.

"Clarice."

"Oh. Is that so, Willy? You surprise me. Very sudden, isn't it?"

"A thunder-clap."

And there was a long silence before Heber spoke again. Then he said, with a sort of piteous apologeticness that nearly made Bird shed tears, "I'll tell you everything. But do you mind giving me a little time?"

"Yes, yes, of course. My dear Willy, don't you hurry. You just take it easy."

"Can I stay the night here? I want to, if it won't be putting you out."

"*Rather!*" said Bird. "Of course you must sleep here. I took that for granted. You shall have my bed."

"Oh, no," Heber murmured, in an indescribably mournful tone. "A sofa . . . This chair . . . Or the floor." Then he asked if he could possibly have something to eat—two or three biscuits. "I have eaten nothing since one o'clock to-day."

Bird, brimming over with commiseration, would not at first admit of so slight a repast. He declared that he would send to a restaurant, where it might not be too late to obtain hot mutton chops and steaks; or, at the worst, Mr. Jones would certainly have some nice cold meat—galantines or something—downstairs at the party. But Heber rejected these kindly offers, indicating that in his present state anything more substantial than a biscuit might choke him.

"Honour bright?" said Bird, on his knees at the side-

board, getting out the biscuit box. He mixed a stiff glass of whisky and soda water, some of which Heber consented to drink, before attacking the biscuits. Heber ate slowly, with long pauses between each bite, and he made those wry faces as though the horrid taste had come back to his mouth again and mastication induced nausea.

Bird left him, and, dragging Mr. Jones from all that gaiety in the basement, got clean sheets and had the bed remade in the other room. Then with gentle firmness he told Heber to go to bed.

"Believe me, old boy, that's the best place for you. Have a jolly good sleep."

"No, not till I have told you everything. I *must* tell you, because I want your help. There are so many things I want you to do for me."

"All right," said Bird. "But you turn in first. Then I'll come and sit with you, and we'll talk it all out."

Heber rose, and, meekly obeying, moved toward the bedroom door.

"You'll find everything you want there," said Bird cheerily. "The only difficulty is the pyjamas. Ha-ha. So short in the leg for you."

Heber made a desolate gesture and disappeared.

After a surprisingly short space of time he called from the other room, and he was already in bed when Bird went to him. He sat high in the bed, with one bony hand clutching a brass bar of the bedstead and the other shading his eyes as though the electric light hurt them. But Bird, understanding it was not the light but any close scrutiny that he wished to avoid, seated himself at a little distance and looked at him as rarely as possible while he told his lamentable tale.

"First of all, Birdie: This is not a thing on which I can accept any advice. No well-meant suggestions of

patching-up or compromise that might apply in other cases are applicable to this case. Not one word of that sort—if you don't mind. It is final—finished."

"*I* see," murmured Bird, looking at the carpet.

"She has disgraced herself. There is no question of denials on her part. In fact, she doesn't deny"; and Heber was stopped by a fit of coughing.

While the cough lasted Bird placed a glass of water on the bedside table and returned to his seat. He was thinking, "How the dickens has it all come out? With Landen dead and buried for over three years one would have bet anything the secret was safe. It must have been some reckless folly of hers that has blown it. Letters? Perhaps she was fool enough to keep Landen's letters, and Willy has somehow tumbled on them. Like a play or a novel."

Heber drank some water and resumed the story in a husky voice.

"I had suspicions, but I always stifled them. She was a man's woman, not a woman's woman—she made no pretense about that. Other women bored her. So I fancied —I believed——" The shuddering reluctance of Heber was most painful to observe, and Bird, no longer able to look away, watched him intently. "It didn't seem as strange as it might have—with any one of different tastes. You remember our chaff? Her kindergarten! Well, I—I swallowed it"; and his mouth worked and he coughed again. "But something occurred a few years ago. There was a lad who frequented our house."

Bird listened with breathless interest. "Now," he thought, "we're getting to it. Landen."

"I forget what year it was," Heber continued; "but it was before that good sensible Landen appeared on the scene."

Bird gasped. Then Willy had *not* discovered Landen. He was speaking of Landen with regard and respect. Then what on earth was it all about?

"I welcomed Landen," said Heber, "for several reasons —not only because I liked him myself, but because of his age and standing—the entire absence of any nonsense about him. He was altogether more *suitable* as—as a tame cat, if one must use the word. He was a tame cat, not a tame kitten. Yes, Landen was a good influence. The friendship with him elevated her, took her out of herself. Perhaps you noticed what I mean, at the time?"

It was Bird's turn to cough, and he did so. "Yes, I follow. No doubt," he spluttered.

"But the occurrence I refer to—what I objected to! This youngster—the name is of no consequence. Suffice it to say that I inadvertently overheard the end of a conversation—some few words that were not intended for my ear. . . She explained, and I accepted her explanation. I accepted it frankly and fully. We fell back—well, into the state of affairs that had existed for some time. I want you to hold all the clues, but—but it is difficult to—to express in words. She and I—a benevolent neutrality. Yes, that expresses it. . . .

"And after that—at a later date—as you saw—we drew together again. We were more to each other than we had ever been. Good heavens, I even sacrificed *you* to her.

"You know—or perhaps you don't know—that before all this, in earlier days, we used to have quarrels. Yes, we used to quarrel rather badly. It was chiefly about money. She was very extravagant, and, although plunging me up to the hilt, always threw her own money in my face. But we kept all that very much to ourselves. I am not one to wear my heart upon my sleeve, and she

of course is an adept in deception. We kept up appearances. You never noticed anything, did you?"

"Never," said Bird earnestly.

"But that was over and done with. As I say, we were now the best of friends. Until the new quarrel began—the quarrel"—Heber was shuddering dreadfully—"yes, the quarrel about—about the chauffeur. We had a young ass of a footman—oh, not seventeen—and she insisted on having him taught to drive and making him our chauffeur when Thompson left us. He nearly broke my neck again and again, and I was always in the greatest anxiety when she was out with him. I pitched into the young blackguard and she defended him—but I believed her championship of him was mere obstinacy. She used to go touring—away for weeks—and I thought 'I shall get a wire to say they have gone over a cliff at Lynton or into a quarry pit at Bath'. . . Never for a moment did it occur to me, until"—and he stopped speaking, clenched both his hands, and brandished them. "To-day I received an anonymous letter—evidently written by somebody at an hotel where they have lately been . . . No, I can't go on with it."

"No," said Bird, very gently. "There's no need. *I* twig."

They were both silent for perhaps eight or ten minutes; then Bird begged his friend to compose himself and go to sleep.

But Heber said he could not sleep until he had given full directions for the morrow. He said that Bird must go first to the solicitors and instruct them to take over all his business affairs, with a view to avoiding any further personal communication between his wife and himself. After that, Bird was to go to the house and pack up and remove all his private belongings—such as clothes, books,

and those tin boxes. Lastly Bird was to have an interview with Mrs. Heber, and she was to be informed that her husband had no intention of divorcing her, but if she wished for a divorce he would make it easy for her to get one by posing as the guilty party.

"She can count my desertion as beginning this afternoon. The other part—all the humbug and sham—I'll arrange for in due season. If she asks why I'm so lenient, you can tell her the truth. I'm not considering her but her children. Poor Tony and Janet. . . ."

"That's good of you, Willy—just like you. Exactly what I would have expected."

Bird then retired to an uneasy night on the sofa in the front room, and when he dressed next morning the visitor was sleeping peacefully. Bird was careful not to wake him.

He carried out all instructions, except those in regard to the interview with Mrs. Heber. She entirely refused to see him. During the long time that he remained at the house he sent several messages and one little note to her, but she continued obdurate.

The short winter day was nearly over when all the packing had been completed and he went away. Her motor-car was standing outside the door, and there was still sufficient daylight to give him a good view of the chauffeur. Wrapped in costly furs, with his peaked cap cocked jauntily, and a cigarette adhering to his upper lip, this juvenile miscreant stood or rather lounged in an insolently negligent manner on the pavement between the car and the doorstep. Indeed he seemed, although motionless, to be exuberantly full of a quite insufferable impudence. He neither touched his hat nor removed the cigarette from his mouth; he scarcely wanted to draw aside to let Bird pass. But Bird, puffing out his cheeks and turning

very hot, advanced so formidably and with such a murderous glare, that childish terror invaded the heart of the youth, and he jumped back as if expecting to have his face smacked. That was really what Bird felt very much inclined to do.

At Half Moon Street Mr. Jones reported that Heber had not yet left his borrowed bed. He roused himself a moment to thank Bird for all the trouble he was taking and then fell asleep again. Bird woke him for dinner, a substantial hot meal, which he enjoyed without getting out of bed. He would not even vacate it to let Jones make it.

He slept and slept, all that night and all the following day. Jones and Bird were both getting alarmed, thinking it was more like coma than proper sleep, wondering if they would ever get him out of bed. But on the evening of the second day he came out of his own accord, and all was well.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR the second time they set up a joint household.

They had found just what they wanted in a delightfully planned little house close to the gates of Skeffington Park and were able to secure the freehold, because the wealthy golf-maniac who caused it to be erected had grown weary of it after a few years, and, as the local agents said, was thus willing to part with it at any sacrifice. As Bird said, "There is a proverb"; and he rubbed his hands and chuckled. "Fools build houses for wise men to live in. Eh, Willy?"

The neighbourhood, although so pretty and countrified, was of course suburban; but Bird's ancient distaste for the suburbs as a place of residence seemed to have gone. He and Heber were together—nothing else really mattered. This house was their very own; they could go on living in it till they died in it; there could come into it no insidious disruptive forces.

They were peacefully installed by the middle of April, and, as many people may remember, this springtide of 1914 was unusually soft and radiant. The whole world had an aspect of serene joy and smiling security; the sun shone with the promise of a future full of long, tranquil days. Bird, in his recovered happiness, was peculiarly susceptible to the charms of the unfolding year. Unable to keep in bed of a morning, he would rise very early and go forth upon the wet grass of the golf course to commune with Nature and practise iron shots.

No human being except himself was astir; the fairway, the park, the universe belonged to him; and he chirruped and skipped in sheer joy. He felt so well, so jolly. The dew flew up in a cloud of diamond dust as he plugged at the ball with his mashie, astonishing himself with the accuracy of these short approaches and also with the power he could produce from a club that is not really intended for long distances; then he would abandon the useful practice, and perhaps pick some daffodils on the bank of that little wood beyond the Dreadnought bunker, or crouch motionless to watch a pair of gray squirrels, or standing and looking upward, with the face of a child, listen to the work of an invisible woodpecker high in a lofty beech tree.

Returning sharp-set to breakfast, he related all such little experiences to Heber, who mocked at them.

"Squirrels, Birdie? How interesting! And a woodpecker making its usual noise—pecking wood, in fact? I dare say a good deal of this might have escaped me. I have neither your knowledge nor your faculty of close observation. Eyes and no eyes—ears and no ears. I have often thought that you had the makings of a field naturalist in you, and you are proving——"

Bird, cutting slice after slice of ham at the sideboard, waved the carving-knife at Heber menacingly and laughed.

"You old rascal, you are pulling my leg. Too bad of you, Willy. . . . Have a bit of ham—if only to keep your mouth shut."

They sat facing each other at breakfast and all other meals, and tasted with every bit of food and drop of drink the deep satisfaction that both felt—the confidence that fate had no more cruel strokes in store for them, that nothing and nobody could henceforth come between them, that they would never on this earth be really separated again.

Out of this feeling there came a return to all their oldest habits, including the habit for which they were regrettably famous. They squabbled. Already there had been sharp disagreements about the merest trifles; often Heber had expressed his opinion rudely, and gradually he became more and more rude during the recurrent warm passages. Some of the windows of the house looked out upon the lane that leads to the high road, and people coming along the lane from the Park gates were sometimes arrested by the sound of very angry voices. If these chance listeners happened to be regular members of the golf club, they knew at once what was up. "Bird and Heber going for each other, hammer and tongs." But such people knew also that there was no need to interfere. The combatants would not really hurt each other! there was no danger of their passing from words to blows, with a result of murder or manslaughter.

They quarrelled, just as they used to do in the distant past. They nagged; Heber's sneering rudeness touched Bird on the raw; Bird, whose words were bludgeons, struck back with indignant force; and then they completely lost their tempers and plunged into reciprocal abuse. But what did it matter how often they fell out? They had time, time to spare, in which to make it up again; and at the worst they never now threatened not to forgive, or called for apologies before forgiving. They knew now, irrefutably, that they were indispensable to each other; and they could not even pretend that it was not so.

The waning month of July saw them once more lodged in the Oceanic Hotel at Beach End, and there the World War burst upon them.

Each in his different way took fire—Heber, with smouldering gloominess, criticizing and even cursing the Gov-

ernment, but saying that, since they had got the country into the appalling mess, they must go through it and everybody must support them; Bird, in flames, excited and exuberant, noisily vowing that he would cease to be an Englishman unless the Government issue its tardy defiance of the enemy. On that August day when it still seemed doubtful whether Great Britain was or was not coming into the war, he could scarcely contain himself. Golf was of course impossible to him; he accosted and harangued strangers on the Parade; he frequented the crowd that hovered about the band-stand, sung "God Save the King" fairly well and the "Marseillaise" execrably, and was beaten altogether by the Belgian anthem. But he made up for his failure by standing on a chair, waving his hat, and yelling for an *encore*.

Already those first days of the war are dropping far behind us, losing all vivid interest, becoming mere matters of history; yet with an effort one may still remember their emotional character and the flooding patriotism that filled them. Nobody was quite sane, or indeed wished to be sane. The wildest and most absurd rumours were accepted as truths; the faintest shrinking from preposterously useless sacrifices seemed mean and base; to doubt the possibility of glorious impossibilities was the part of a traitor. Nowhere more than at Beach End was this generous fever perceptible, and at Beach End no one surrendered himself more completely to the crowd-contagion than Bird. He thought with the crowd, throbbed with the crowd; and trotted about, driven hither and thither by unfounded hopes and unreasoning fears. "Willy, have you heard what they say at the railway station? The entire German fleet has been sent to the bottom. By Jingo, that's quick work"; and he was gone again. "Willy," he cried, returning, "they say the social-

ists have blown up all the culverts and bridges between here and London . . . There's a conspiracy to poison the water supply . . . A mine has been providentially discovered under Exeter Cathedral."

But even while the delirium lasted, while the whole background of life seemed to lurch and wobble, as though destiny's carpenters were on the point of shoving it away and setting the new terrific scenes in which one would henceforth act and speak, while Bird and fantasy still hopped with linked hands, certain small but solid facts began to grasp at his dispersed attention; and soon by their very solidity they sobered and calmed down.

One such fact was the departure of the French cooks from the Oceanic Hotel; another the unostentatious exit of the German and Austrian waiters; another the appearance at meals of a group of territorial officers in khaki. Bird looked at those young men with a soul-consuming admiration. Yesterday they were just ordinary fellows wearing blue suits and coloured socks, or loose knickerbockers and stockings such as he wore himself; and now they were these alert, quietly impressive officers in the brown belts, the breeches, and the puttees of active service. They had been *mobilized.*

Mobilized, mobilization—the words affected Bird profoundly; they made him vibrate with enthusiasm and ache with regret. He grew sober; he ceased to run about. The signs of mobilization were what fascinated him now. He watched and followed some military wagons going up the High Street toward the railway. Foot soldiers marched with the wagons and a few rode on them—these holding in position the piled-up load of kits and blankets. Bird wanted to cry out, "Find room for me on one of your wagons. Take me with you. Give me a kit and a blanket." Expanding his chest, he marched

along beside them and tried to keep step—left, right—left . . . left. But at a corner where a lot of girls had run out of a shop to cheer and kiss their hands he stopped abruptly, feeling as if his heart was about to burst.

He had now, for the first time, a true understanding of his *elderliness*. Hitherto he had spoken of all those unconsidered years lightly and jokingly; but now, thinking about them as the grimmest of tragedies, he could have wept. Useless now to pat his chest and say "I *feel* young." These people—the authorities, Government, what not—had no use for him. In their eyes, as well as according to the rules and regulations, he was an old man—he must stand back, stand on one side, and let youth go marching by. His place was among the other old men, and the women and the children; he might listen to the bands, take his hat off to the flag, sing "God Save the King"; he might sit and shiver with the women when the guns began to roar, or hold their hands and do all in his power to keep up their courage.

It was worse than not being a man at all.

One morning at breakfast in the bow window of the coffee room he showed Heber a letter in the *Times* that had been written by a well-known novelist. The talented author asked what in this great emergency could be done by the man of forty-eight or fifty. Would not a veteran corps be formed? Surely the service of middle-aged patriots should somehow be turned to account.

Heber scowled, and showed Bird a leading article which said it was the civilian's duty to remain a civilian to carry on business as usual and so forth.

"Do you agree with that, Willy?"

"There may be exceptions to every rule," said Heber darkly. "But I hope you don't fancy you are going to

be one of the exceptions," he added, with a quick suspicious glance at Bird's meditative face. "No, I hope you're not going to get a lot of silly nonsense into your head."

But the nonsense was already there, or at least the nonsensical germ of it. Afraid to reply to Heber truthfully and make confession of his vague yearnings, he remained silent, whistled beneath his breath, and then went out by himself for an immensely long walk. He turned his back on the noisy, excited town, on the estuary with distant Lippleford, the river, the wooded shore, and climbed the untenanted hills, attacking each stiff slope fiercely and violently, as if he wished to test his heart and lungs as well as his strong, muscular calves. He carried no luncheon and felt very hungry by two o'clock, but was able to brood with a noble scorn upon the sound of the hotel gong, the table-d'hôte menu, and all that munching crowd at the heavy mid-day meal. War—in a war one does not eat at regular hours but when one can. All day long he thought of it—war. And toward tea-time the travail of his mind ceased; there had been born in him the tremendous thought that he, Bird, by hook or by crook, was going to take part in it. He would defy the years, trample them under his feet, and act on the proverbial saying that he had quoted so often. A man *is* as young as he feels—whatever military text books or recruiting officers may say to the contrary. Somehow or other he would shake off this invidious and humiliating civilian costume, scramble into any sort of uniform, and strike a blow for England. At the top of a vast cliff, alone among the sheep and the heather, he slapped his chest with a grandly renewed confidence and said to himself: "The thing can be done, and I mean to do it."

On his return to the hotel he found a scribbled note,

informing him that Heber had been unexpectedly called to London by business that would take a few days to transact. Bird was surprised and at the same time relieved.

After dinner he timidly approached those officers at the centre table of the big room, and, with many apologies for the liberty that he was taking, addressed them. They received him courteously, and begged him to sit down and drink a glass of port wine. In an ecstasy of gratitude he obeyed them and sat there, feeling that none of this would have been possible with Heber hanging round his neck, feeling also that a hundred eyes were focussed upon him. Almost he seemed to hear the astonished whispers. "See. Mr. Bird has scraped acquaintances with the officers. He has sat down with them. They are pouring out wine for him. He is drinking their health —he is talking. What on earth can he have to say to them?"

He was saying, shyly and nervously, yet with enormous sincerity, "How I envy you fellows . . . By Jove,yes —you're splendid—and here's luck—the very best of luck." He raised the wine glass and gulped. Then he blushed, smiled, leaned back in his chair, and wriggling a little, went on brokenly: "I'd like to go with you. Yes, you bet. Ha-ha. Not poss, eh? One thing—I can ride. I don't want to buck—but put me on a horse, and, well, I'm a boy again. But I suppose the authorities—at my age? Just laugh at me, what?"

The officers at any rate did not laugh at him. They encouraged him, saying that his ambition did him credit, and that on the whole it was he who deserved the adjective "splendid" and not they. Next morning they gave him a sheaf of blue War Office application forms.

He was secretly occupied all day in filling those blue

forms with biographical and other details. A local doctor consented after a sketchy examination to vouch for his fitness from the medical point of view; a golf-playing clergyman supplied, in the spaces allotted for the purpose, a flourishing testimonial with regard to his character, education, social status, and he himself embellished the papers with fervid declarations of his desire to aid the realm in its hour of need—finally wrapping round each completed form a letter in which he told the Secretary of the War Office that he had the honour to be, sir, his obedient servant Carrington Bird. After sending off the packets by registered post he hastily snatched a little food, and then hurried off to join a company of other patriotic gentlemen who had armed themselves with sticks and volunteered to guard points of danger during the night.

A picked squad was detailed to watch over the Beach End gasworks, the notion being that all those German waiters treacherously returning, or spies, or socialists, might choose this as a vulnerable spot; and here Bird found himself attentively observing the sun go down behind the huge gasometers, and pacing to and fro as the heaps of coke, the brick sheds, and the manager's office became vague in the gathered shadows of night. A man called Pearce had rather arrogantly elected himself to be sergeant or leader of the squad, and he visited Bird from hour to hour.

"Is that you, Bird?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bird, saying "Sir" not because Pearce had any right to the title, but because the military sound of it was so pleasantly thrilling.

"Anything to report?"

"No, sir."

"Very good," said Pearce, assuming a more arrogant

manner every time Bird called him Sir. "You've not been smoking, have you?"

"No, sir, certainly not."

"I'll have no smoking here—no smoking, under any pretense whatever"; and Pearce strode away into the darkness.

It was a terribly long vigil and toward the end of it the spirit of Bird wavered badly. The coldness of the summer night astonished him; toward dawn there came such an icy air as might have crept to him across glaciers instead of villa gardens and tennis courts—it chilled his very bones. But for the cold he must have surrendered to an almost overwhelming somnolence; and he thought despairingly, "It is no good. If I were like this out there on night duty, I should fall asleep at my post and disgrace myself. I should be court-martialled—and shot."

The sun was high enough to gild the tops of the gasometers before he was relieved, and till then he had been thinking of the war very dolefully—not of its music and cheering, what one may call the "God-Save-the-King" side of it, but of its stern realities. "I must give it up," he thought sadly. "It is beyond my powers."

But breakfast and the sight of those jolly officers at the hotel revived him, restored the fire in him.

Those truly topping fellows wished him success, and said he was a real sportsman. They and their troops left Beach End very early on the following morning; and Bird, after seeing them off, went straight to London by the first civilian train. In London he visited a yeomanry headquarters near Clapham Common, called at the War Office, left a card on a lieutenant-general to whom he had once spoken years ago, and did other silly things. He returned to Beach End by a night train, and Heber came back there on the morrow.

Bird had brought with him from London a skipping-rope, and every morning after his bath he skipped and skipped and skipped. Pausing for breath and seeing himself in the looking-glass he hated his rotund stomach and thought with remorse of past over-nourishment, lazy hours in cushioned chairs, and too many whiskies and sodas. He made the rope flog the floor with an accelerated beat, he skipped till the perspiration blinded him. Then he paused again, timorously wondering if the sound of his skips had been overheard. His room was on the ground floor, and his window being wide open, perhaps he had even been seen by somebody passing outside. Most of all he dreaded that any tale of his skipping should reach the ears of Heber, who would be quick to divine the inward meaning of such a practice and equally quick to tease him about it. He felt that in his present frame of mind he could not support ridicule or even the lightest sort of kindly chaff.

One morning, directly he had dressed, he went up to Heber's room on the fifth floor, and, cheerfully banging the door, asked if he might go in. There was no answer; but extraordinary sounds came through the door, as though Heber was staggering about the room, and gasping and groaning. Bird, alarmed, opened the door at once, and saw Heber with extended arms fling his body from side to side, lunge it forward, and jerk it back. He was in the midst of the most violent form of Danish exercises, and the grunts merely proclaimed the extreme effort needed for their performance.

"What the deuce do you want?" he gasped wrathfully, when he had brought himself to a standstill.

He was angry, as Bird said and guessed, because he had been discovered and because the discovery betrayed his secret. This course of severe training plainly indi-

cated that he as well as Bird wanted to strike a blow for England. He had been thinking just what Bird thought.

"Oh, Willy, what a lark if we could go together!"

Heber denied a desire to take part in the conflict; he begged Bird to give up any idea of the sort that he might be foolishly entertaining; and while he said all this, at the dressing table, with his back turned, he manipulated a collar and stud nervously. Then he spoke in a lofty and dictatorial style that soon nettled Bird.

"No, I can't allow you to make an ass of yourself. I shouldn't be your friend if I didn't put my foot down. Once and for all, drop it, Birdie."

"Oh, thank you for nothing," said Bird, with warmth. "I don't like this, Willy. Can you give me your word of honour that you are not trying to go yourself?"

Heber turned his back again and would not answer.

"Ah! Very nice—I don't think," said Bird heatedly, and beginning to snort.

Then, softening, Heber smiled and spoke gently.

"Birdie, be sensible. Drop it. In any case, you haven't the ghost of a chance. They'll never take you."

"Why? I ask, why?"

"Why?" echoed Heber, smiling more broadly. "Do you remember what Mr. Pickwick said to Mr. Tupman?"

"No, I do not," said Bird, very red in the face.

"Well, it was when Tupman wanted to go to the garden-party dressed as a brigand and Mr. Pickwick considered that he ought not to dress like that. . . 'Why not?' asked Mr. Tupman. 'Because, sir,' said Mr. Pickwick, 'you are too old and too fat'. . . Now, my dear Birdie, please, please restrain yourself. I only said it in fun. I'm awfully sorry if I have hurt your feelings."

But of course the feelings of Bird were hurt, of course he was angry. He told Heber that it put the lid on, and

after banging the door loudly behind him he went downstairs and breakfasted in indignant loneliness.

Meeting Heber a few hours later, and speaking to him as if to a semi-stranger, he said, "I shall go back to Skeffington Park to-morrow. I want to be nearer the centre of things."

"I think I'll come, too," said Heber meekly.

"Please yourself," said Bird with extreme curtness as he turned on his heel.

It was in the hotel garden, and Heber followed him a little way along the path as though about to make a deprecating appeal. He seemed grieved to see that the quarrel was such a bad one.

In the next week at Skeffington Park each went his own way, each thought his own thoughts; they both spent much time in London, and when they happened to eat their meals together they talked formally of public events. Then one afternoon Bird returning to the house learned from a servant that Heber was in his room packing. Mr. Heber, the maid said, had telephoned for a cab to take him to the station.

After some pulling of his moustache Bird went upstairs.

"So I hear you're off, Willy. Might one ask where?"

"Yes, old boy, we part company now—for a bit—and I do hope without any soreness. I know there has been a cloud; but, dear old Birdie, please let us blow it away." All these words were so pleasing in themselves that Bird would have responded with eager haste to finish the quarrel, if they had not been uttered haltingly and queerly. Moreover, Heber showed a hang-dog air, bending over the portmanteau, never raising his eyes. He presently went on talking. He said that by a series of odd chances he had succeeded in "getting into something."

Yes, most unexpectedly, he had in fact been given a commission.

Bird sat upon the bed and breathed stertorously.

"Well, my compliments. Congrats—and, ah, respectful homage. In the circumstances very remarkable—an achievement; since," and he snorted, "if I may say so without offence, you are older than I am myself—although not fat, as you were good enough to remind me. No, no—very thin. Was it your figure that took their fancy?"

"Birdie, don't go on like this."

"Then perhaps you'll explain. I should be glad to find out how you've done the trick."

"Simply influence," said Heber, trying to lighten matters by smiles and facetiousness. "I pulled a string."

"I see. And it never occurred to you to pull the string for me, too?"

"Birdie, the string as it were broke in my hand after the one pull."

Bird stormed now for a little while; and then Heber very earnestly implored him to stay quietly at home, or, failing this wise conduct, at least to avoid entry into any combatant service.

"And what service have you got into yourself?"

Heber, replying lamely and with lowered eyes, said he had been posted to field artillery.

"Field artillery!" shouted Bird, jumping off the bed. "Why, damn it all, that means the front itself. That's front line."

Heber, walking about the room, said the point was that their two cases were entirely different; for whereas he himself had lived his life, Bird was happy, popular, with all his powers of enjoyment unimpaired.

But Bird would listen to no more of this stuff. He

declared that it was dirty of Heber to do what he had done; it was a mean trick to play, the last straw, the limit. "No, I can't forgive you." And, working himself up, he said, not for the first time, that he had finished with Heber, and Heber might go to the devil.

CHAPTER XX

THEY never saw or spoke to each other again until Bird obtained a commission in the Army Service Corps. Then they met by appointment at Liverpool Street Railway station, and had a wonderful merry-making.

A year later they were both in France.

One hesitates to recount except in the briefest possible jottings any of their adventures, because the very word "war" has become an eyesore and is wearisome to readers of books. Yet this natural and proper distaste for any further description of the vast turmoil may perhaps be due to the fact that in war books it is only the horror of war that has been painted. The exigencies of space, the necessity of heroic action for their heroes, the hope of conveying something of the uplift that made pain seem beautiful and death sublime, have forced writers to concentrate upon the blood-red fury of battle and to omit nearly all else. Not for a moment would one suggest that these pictures of words have been either falsely drawn or too highly coloured. No, Heaven knows that the war was bad enough—but it was not bad all the time. There were delightful periods out of the line; and even in the trenches the bombardment was not incessant. Hours, even days passed with little disturbance; and when the sun shone and the water sank beneath broken duckboards, the stigmata of martyrdom were wiped with the mud from smiling faces, jokes cracked themselves all along the fire-

step, and from traverse to traverse laughter sounded like an echo of joy, if not joy itself.

Moreover, there was the long respite known as "rest," when war-worn divisions marched away from their place of torment, marched till the sound of the guns grew faint, till they came to their allotted villages where men could sleep in barns, saunter on cobblestones with nothing but the evening light to redden their faces, or bathe their blistered feet in a trench made by nature to hold the course of a clear, rippling stream as it flowed through pleasant meadows with parapets of golden flowers. While the rest lasted, they played games, sang songs, ran races; the food was plenty, if the beer was bad; they were as safe as if they had been quartered at Hammersmith Broadway instead of Supplice-le-Petit. In a word, they could be thoroughly jolly—and forget.

At first this was the side of things principally seen by Heber and Bird. Heber the gunner had little to do with guns; he belonged to the divisional ammunition column, resided at the wagon lines, and visited the batteries only at convenient and comfortable moments; while Bird, in another division, enjoyed all the amenities that are possible with a divisional train. The work was of course terribly hard, but they nevertheless acquitted themselves well; for to both of them the war had brought a renewal of life, a good health that had never before been theirs. All that they wanted for the perfecting of existence was to get into the same division, and Heber already had made efforts to achieve the desired rearrangement.

By the end of 1915, when Bird came home on leave, he had developed into an amazingly soldier-like figure. His moustache, cut short and brushed up, stuck out from his lip; his blue eyes shone with a mild truculence; he carried himself with the sort of modest assurance that might

easily degenerate to a swashbucklering swagger. Heber had contrived his leave at the same time; and it was during this brief absence from duty that, with the aid of Bird, he went through certain formalities at a London hotel in order to prove his unfaithfulness to, as well as his desertion of, Mrs. Heber.

The spring came tardily in 1916, but burst forth at last with a glory as of full summer, its warmth and sunlight indeed surpassing the vernal explosion of 1914; and on these vividly bright April days Captain Bird of the A. S. C. reached the happiest point of his life. He was aware of his happiness, too. As he rode with a string of wagons behind him along well-kept roads on the plateaux of Artois, he felt it thrilling inside him and all over him, so deliciously that his thoughts were often like prayers of gratitude to the beneficent Providence that had led him onward through repining and revolt to this supreme content. He thought: How wonderful life is, gliding past one in drab monotony—life the faded back cloth of a worn-out panorama—and then, when you have given up hope, and believe it will never show you anything else, changing in a moment to a pageant more tremendous than your wildest fancies could have imagined.

"I am fifty-two—and here I am, Carrington Bird, an officer on horseback in the *war*—in the European war—in the greatest war that the history of the world has ever been given to record! Who would have believed, who *could* have believed—ME, in the very thick of it?"

An exaggeration, that thickness, perhaps—but not unjustifiable! For the German line was only three miles away as the crow flies; he could see the little white puffs of smoke from the enemy's guns; this morning they had shelled the railhead close to which he lived. He had been under fire for fifteen minutes. *Under fire*—entrancing,

soul-stirring words ever to be truthfully applied to Carrington Bird of club armchairs, benches on seaside parades, or sofas in hired lodgings! And now, as he and his wagons went down the hill-side toward a village that was as yet almost hidden by its fringe of trees, there came an aërial rush, the roar of an invisible express train, and a crash like several railway accidents rolled into one —as a shell from the largest sort of inimical howitzer burst in a field three or four hundred yards ahead. He was under fire again. The enemy did that sort of thing sporadically, a single crump or several together, here, there, and anywhere, to keep your blood circulating and prevent you from taking it too easy. Bird stopped his wagons and trotted on down the road, in a gallant reconnaissance—not perhaps really thinking there would be more shells, but pretending to himself that he did so think. In sight of the yawning crater, at the essential focus of all the peril, he pulled his horse almost upon its haunches, and after a portentous pause, indicated by appropriate pump-handle movements of the arm that his distant wagons might now advance again. His plump face was grim and rigid; he had a splendid frowning tranquillity, a Napoleonic magnetism that no doubt communicated itself to his drivers and steadied their nerves, as he sat there motionless while the wagons rolled past him into safety. When the last wagon had gone by he trotted after them, and, slapping his boot and whistling, resumed his proper station at the head of the convoy. Yes, Bird of the A. S. C. frankly loved the war.

No one in it was a stranger. The very word that you used to answer to each sentry's challenge precluded such a notion. "Who goes there?" . . . "Friend." . . . "Pass friend." You might ride alone by day or night, for mile after mile never hearing a voice, and yet you were

not lonely; you felt all around you the immense, unbroken companionship. This sense of the surrounding multitude of well-wishers was perhaps the very main-spring of his happiness. He seemed to have found ten thousand Hebers, whereas till now he had had but one.

In merely social intercourse he knew that he was not only tolerated, but liked. At the company mess they enjoyed his stories, however long, they laughed at his jokes, however old; they called him "the Bird," and he adored his new nickname; they kept his food hot when he was out late at night; at any hour they welcomed the sight of his red face and bald head; they chaffed him unmercifully, but they never stopped liking him. And Bird thought, no man has lived in vain who has won this; a hundred deaths would not be too much to pay as the price of it.

Sometimes while he rode at night, with all that kindness and warmth of the company mess in the paved estaminet room waiting for him beyond the darkness, his thoughts were really rhapsodical as he meditated on the glory of male companionship. At its best it is the highest thing that life has to offer; and it can never be quite at its best where the visible or invisible influence of women impinges upon it. He asked himself the definite questions, Are women really worth while? Are they ever really needed? Here were these millions of men getting on so well without women; here every myth about the essential needfulness of women was triumphantly exploded; here men could be seen cooking, sweeping rooms, making beds, even sewing on buttons. Here, where you never got a long hair in your soup or a patch of face-powder on your coat sleeve, all worked like clock-work; you lived in peace, harmony, and comfort; there were no petty spites or troublesome jealousies.

Riding beneath the tranquil, unconcerned stars, and

thinking philosophically, he felt certain that, if you sum up any ordinary man's life, you will find that man companionship has been the only thing in it that was worth having.

He thought of his own life; seeing it in pictures, yet meditating calmly as the pictures passed his mental eye. When a picture came of Amy, he stopped thinking and let it pass with a sigh. Poor Amy! But for the rest he saw vividly and thought relentlessly. Always, always, women had been the disturbing factor—from the very beginning of things. First there were those girls at restaurants, inflaming his mind, sowing seeds of discord between him and his pal, depleting his pocket by the cost of the food and drink wasted on them; then those girls at Lippleford, breaking up a happy home, throwing one into stormy seas, making one as a ship-wrecked voyager to toss about for years unrescued, till chance brought solid ground under one's feet again—and Mrs. Heber, with those young men unnerving themselves because of her, getting no joy, getting nothing, really, in exchange for the fuss and fret of their hearts, the deterioration of their minds. And his own secret thoughts, to this day, in regard to Daphne Yates. How much better he would have been without such thoughts! Yet there they were always, behind everything, down beneath everything—that sense of loss, that irritation and shame in the thrown-away chance.

Yes, Daphne Yates was the most disturbing of the lot; she was more than a woman, she was a symbol, an incarnation and embodiment of man's eternal illusion. Always, always, in regard to women, there is the haunting illusion of some ineffable delight that one misses—that one must always miss, because it does not exist, except in dreams. Something one *can* get, but not this, the thing for which

one vaguely craves. He thought of one or two happily married men of his acquaintance, fathers of families watching vigorous lads grow up, giving their daughters away in marriage, being photographed with their wives on silver weddings. They were happy, in a way. But that sort of happiness is only to be attained by total submission to the woman, and a loss of half the masculineness of the man. No, there is no getting away from it. Love of women *is* emasculation.

He thought of the nearest woman—the woman who had come as far as they were allowed to come in the direction of the front line. Even those nurses at hospitals and bases were doing it to each wounded man that fell into their power—with their false softness, their treacherous fondness, they were unfitting him for his stern task, taking the heart out of him, filling him with tender longings and vain regrets; they were spoiling him even while keeping him alive; and they made of him their ripened prey as soon as they set him on his legs. Even if he did not fall in love with them themselves, they had so disturbed him that he fell in love with somebody else. He went home on sick leave, to tumble from one pair of arms to another, till cousin Jane, or some wounded comrade's sister, or a girl on top of an omnibus that he had never met before, till one of them refused to open her arms again, and held him fast. Then after months he came back here to duty, not the man he was, just half the man he was before his accident.

The work grew harder for everybody, including Bird. It was no longer like playing at soldiers; it was the real thing. With the Battle of the Somme the war passed into another stage, a never-slackening activity; and the work grew harder and harder still—almost impossibly

hard for men as old as Heber and Bird. They were both in the Somme battle; in it if perhaps not quite of it, labouring on the noisy, desperately perilous fringes of it, killing Germans by deputy but not with their own hands. They came out of it weakened, rather shaken, some grumbling pains in Bird's bones, and a nasty stitch in the side of Heber's chest. But they had to go on working.

Bird, then, in the cold autumn weather found himself almost continuously under shell fire; he rode sometimes all night as well as all day, and felt so tired that he had to forego philosophical musings. There were days on which he ceased to think of anything but the elemental facts of a precarious existence—the desire for sleep, the emptiness of his stomach, this gnawing pain in the lumbar regions. The utmost effort of unnecessary toil in the higher centres of the brain was a calculation of the time that had elapsed since the opening of the Somme business. Three months—it seemed three years, three decades. Sometimes when he got off his horse after long hours in the saddle, he groaned aloud and was so stiff that he could scarcely stand.

Meanwhile, Heber had never relaxed in his attempts to get him transferred to the division to which he himself belonged; and in November his skill and pertinacity were rewarded. Captain Bird was "asked for" so peremptorily that there was no choice but to say he could be "spared"; he was ordered by high authority to report himself at the headquarters of the other division. He hated leaving all these dear fellows; but nevertheless he was glad to go. In these last weeks he had felt a nostalgic longing to be within reach of Heber; he *needed* Heber, believing that from Heber he would draw a new energy, a moral support that would restore him to the top of his game; and further, if the truth must be admitted—a

truth that he did not admit to himself—he hoped that the work might not be quite so very hard with Heber's lot. As to this he was wrong. He jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire; for his old division went north to some charming quiet part of the line near Armentières, and his new division was ear-marked for the fabulously difficult operations now known to history as the Battle of the Ancre.

They at once gave him work to do, so much of it that he had been in the division for over ten days before he even saw Heber. Then, after a long search, he found him toward nightfall on the outskirts of a miserable broken-down village in the middle of the great concentration of troops. Beyond parks of lorries, beyond all the infantry huts, by an orchard that had become a sea of mud, the biting wind carried the well-known odour of mules—of large numbers of closely packed mules. And there was Heber, in the roadway, watching droves of mules as his men led them back from watering.

"Birdie—at last! How are you, old chap?"

"Top-hole. And how are you, Willy?"

Heber pushed his steel hat to the back of his head, and with a cadaverous smile said that he was right as rain. He looked amazingly gaunt and thin, tall and dilapidated as a scarecrow—such a scarecrow as you might have dressed in garments hurriedly snatched from any dead bodies lying within reach. His tunic was torn and muddy, his loose breeches flapped in the wind, and his knees seemed like sticks in the huge gum boots that he had put on to protect himself from the splashings of his animals. As they stood talking, he turned away from moment to moment, and yelled an order in a hoarse, high-pitched voice, and then, turning to Bird again, put his hand to his side and coughed.

"I don't like to hear you cough like that," said Bird. "You must take care of yourself, and not overdo it."

Heber shrugged his shoulders, and smiled when he had done coughing. "Nothing at all," he declared. "Nothing to trouble about."

"If it is, I hope you'll report sick."

"Can't afford the luxury of sickness just now," said Heber, with a laugh.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, anyhow," said Bird; and he too laughed, while beating his hands together to keep them warm. "But, I say, Willy. I've a bone to pick with you. How you have been blowing my trumpet, you old rascal—telling them that I know everything. Too bad! I suppose you want to get me red tabs—make a staff officer of me—what!"

"Well, you couldn't be worse than the rest of them," said Heber genially.

Then they talked of the fighting that was to be.

"It's going to be the devil of a push," said Heber, and his dark eyes glowed as they spoke of the redoubtable army commander. No one but General Gough would have thought of delivering battle so late in the year. Any one except General Gough would have recoiled from the difficulties that opposed them. "It's a tall order," said Bird. "Perhaps he'll postpone it, after all."

"Not he," said Heber. "I'll bet you three to one he goes bang through with it."

The battle had begun when they next met. They were both in what remained of a large village on the hill-side above the Ancre valley.

Again one hesitates—again one fears to dwell on details, because of that natural and proper distaste for any further description of the ugliness of war. But

hurrying on, glozing things over as much as possible, above all being brief, one may perhaps be permitted to say that this village, not to mention what lay just ahead of it, was, in army language, "blue hell."

In its ruins and the bare fields that surrounded it were gathered all those services that keep a battle going; thousands of horses and mules shivered in the mud upon its confines; motor ambulances by hundreds, lorries full of shells, staff cars, blocked its entrances; sappers, gunners, signallers, crowded what had been its streets; and through it, to and fro, along the single road by the river, marched the infantry of at least four divisions. There were no roofed buildings, no undestroyed cellars, no dug-outs; no real shelter of any sort, except what one could contrive for oneself. By day one had rain and snow and an abominable slimy thaw, and at night frost. By night as well as day our guns thundered across it, flashed their lightning before it and behind it; and every few minutes something made in Germany hit it—big stuff, high explosive, arriving without premonitory whistle or rush of wind, not like a shell-burst, seeming a mine that had gone up with a vast black fountain of earth and stones just beside the church, or against the dressing-station, or wherever the crash happened to be; making you totter, and lose your bearings for a few minutes, till you came to again and heard that the two walls and tarpaulin that formed your mess-room had been knocked over, or three of your horses killed, or your brother officer blown to pieces. But, of course, nothing mattered and nobody minded, since victory like an impalpable flag flew high in the cruelly cold air. Our men had taken Beaumont Hammel and were pushing on. The enemy had been given a blow that, as the event proved, made him reel all through the winter and sent him limping fifteen miles away in the spring.

For nearly a fortnight—one day less—Bird and Heber were both extremely busy in this village; Bird at a huge dump or store, and Heber loading his shells on pack animals and sending them forward unremittingly. They visited each other in moments of stolen leisure. Heber, although he looked awful, said he was very comfortable, and he pointed proudly to a wagon that he used as his sleeping-place when a chance to sleep came.

"Sure, old chap? Honour bright?"

"Rather. Never better."

"The division's coming out in three days. Fact. You may take it from me," said Bird, with the importance of a person attached to headquarters.

But before the relief there came what Bird in subsequent years always spoke of as "an amusing episode." It was really no joke at the time.

For several nights at the end of the fortnight they had used him as guide and commander of convoys to the forward area, and on the last night of all he was ordered to make an initial journey along a new track that had been made by the engineers of the incoming division. In the afternoon he reconnoitred it. From another totally smashed village it led upward to the high ground, then right across what had been the German trenches, down a mile or so of sloping ground, and delivered you into a road that was sheltered by another high ridge. The roadway ran thus sheltered within a few hundred yards of our newly consolidated front line.

It was already dark when Bird finished his reconnaissance and got upon his horse close to those vacated German trenches. He shivered involuntarily as he looked about him from the eminence of his saddle. In the fading light the whole scene had such an intolerably sinister aspect. There had been no attempt as yet to bury the

dead, and in this labyrinth of half-obliterated trenches, tangled wire, deep pits, and shell holes, the gray bodies of friends and foes lay huddled, sometimes seeming to embrace, sometimes still to tear at one another in death as they had done in life. Through all this the trail meandered bewilderingly; while beyond stretched the desolation of the bare slopes, the long ridges, the black river, and clusters of branchless tree stumps. "What a landscape to shove on a Christmas card!" thought Bird, after that one shiver, examining the twisted track and trying to print every salient feature on his memory. "It's going to be jolly difficult in the dark."

He felt tired when he got back to his own village; but a few hours later, when night had fallen, he was duly parading his unwieldy convoy—hundreds of animals, horses and mules, laden with everything possible and impossible—water, ammunition, trench tools, angle irons—each animal led by a man. Bird, shouting in the darkness, called out names and numbers. He had officers to help him, youthful supernumeraries drawn from all sorts of units; but he, Bird, was the appointed leader of it all.

The night was dark, but not too dark for eyes accustomed to this sort of work; our guns flashing and booming gave a swift warm glow, and every now and then a pallid radiance like moonshine flickered in the sky as a flare went up from the German lines. They had not used their flares till now; also, as Bird soon understood, it was the first night on which the German artillery were shooting with accuracy from their new positions. In rapid succession three huge crumps burst among the ruins, delaying the start, tending to stupefy one and confuse one's thoughts. Then, in the anxious silence that followed, Bird heard somebody cough, and recognized Heber close at his elbow.

Heber reported himself as carrying shells that were urgently required, and he requested that his animals might pass to the head of the column.

"But why are *you* doing it?" said Bird, indignant. "Why have they sent you? This isn't your job. It's a damned shame."

"May I go on?" said Heber.

"Yes, go on," said Bird. "I'll be with you directly."

And he mounted his horse, and the procession started. He intended to ride as far as he could, in order to save himself fatigue, but riding was rather dangerous because of the state of the ground. To put the lid on everything, the thaw was persisting to-night; men and animals waded through the mud and water, slipped and floundered on the margin of shell craters. "Oh, curse it," he said to his orderly. "I shall have to walk." But the swaying, clattering, pushing string of laden beasts made it impossible to dismount. He went sliding, slithering on till they all reached the ridge above that second village. Here he dismounted, and here the fun began.

The devils were shelling their old line, the farther slope, and the hill beyond the road.

"Wait here. Shove the horses behind this bit of wall."

And he hurried forward, plunging into that maze of trenches—not really knowing whether he was on the right track or not. He had lost his place at the head of the column; there were animals ahead of him. In a sudden glare of hot light he saw a long string of them right ahead and thought, "I'm not leading them at all. That must be Heber's lot. But does Heber know the way?" Next moment he was struck by an animal's pack and sent staggering. He ran and fell again. All about him there seemed to be colourless flame and dust; the tinkle of refuse sounded as it fell upon steel hats and

loose stones. And nearer every moment came the crashes, the volcanic rending of earth, air, and thought, with each new shell-burst.

"What are you waiting for?" he shouted. "Get on. Get on." The whole mob had halted, and the confusion was increasing at the top of the slope. The enemy were cutting off the slope with a remorseless barrage. Invisible iron serpents seemed to be dancing on it; black fountains, with a vast core of released force, seemed to spout up, catch the reflected light, and reach to the very sky. The stupefying effect of the noise was quite extraordinary. One felt as if with every explosion one had been buffeted on the head. One went on doing one's best, but with a lessened ability—like a cuffed scholar whose task is becoming not only difficult but impossible, whose cruel schoolmaster doesn't really mean him to succeed. Bird, wiping dust or mud from his eyes, and still pushing forward, had these sensations very strongly. Presently he was shouting in the midst of a small group of officers and non-coms. They all talked together during a lull in the noise.

"Don't see how we can do it. . . . Whizz-bangs, too. . . . How can they be—that distance? . . . They've got the range. . . . Look!"

At this moment a fresh glare showed Bird the roadway that was his ultimate goal—far ahead, down the slope—suddenly visible, clearly defined, gone again. But he knew then that they were on the right track.

"Come on!" he yelled, using the army language. "We've —well, got to go, and it won't get better by looking at it."

They went down the long slope almost as if it had been a toboggan slide—through the slackening barrage. Not Bird or any one else was now leading. In flashes he saw

tremendous unforgettable sights—a heavily laden mule skipping high in the air, seeming to buck and kick in play, with a dead man hanging to its leading-rein; two mules quite near to him subsiding backward into a shell hole with a last flourish of their fore legs; the distorted face of a dying man close to his feet.

Then at last they were on the roadway, crowding upon it in wild confusion; more like a drove of animals that had escaped from a prairie fire than the neat and orderly column set in motion two hours ago. Bird, in command again, got them back off the road upon its empty borderland, and there they were sorted out. As always happened, the casualties so far were less than one would have supposed. Bird then was exceedingly busy; calling out the names of units, being yelled for by brigade officers, getting swept away and losing himself in small crowds of infantrymen, who had been sent there as carrying parties and clamoured for the stuff they were to carry; fluttering a sheaf of mud-stained papers in his trembling hands—busy, very busy indeed. Gradually the consignments were delivered to the consignees. But it all took time—such a long time; and the fatigue of it was heavier and heavier.

They should have been safe on this roadway, but they were not. Mysteriously and demoniacally, shells that should have sailed safely overhead and hit the slope now began to fall upon the road. Just when the crowd was thickest a battery of guns came lumbering along and drove people helter skelter. Then a dump of bombs was hit by a shell, and exploded like half a dozen Fifth of Novembers, crackling, spluttering, with ridiculous but death-dealing fireworks. This cleared the road for half an hour.

A quantity of slits had already been dug in the bank, and there were also some galleries and long passages that

led to underground chambers, which the Germans, with their traditional laboriousness, had dug for Heaven knows what purpose. In these chinks and crannies all dived for safety. It was fairly quiet when they emerged again, but the casualties had been numerous, and one saw stretcher-bearers performing their task far and near.

Finally Bird's task was nearly done. For a long time the unloaded animals had been going back up the slope. At last Bird stood upon the road almost alone. He said good-night to some brigade people in a dug-out, and then, the work done, began slowly to retrace his steps homeward. At the bottom of the slope he killed three hopelessly injured animals, holding a revolver to their foreheads, as instructed in the books; remembering that the books said the poor brute will always fall backward and not forward, yet instinctively jumping away after every discharge.

His fatigue was now very great, and the climb up that interminable slope proved painfully exhausting. For a little way a glow of satisfaction in the accomplished task seemed to be sustaining him; but then it seemed to go, a candle burnt out, and only the fatigue was there. The mud caking on his boots had made a huge additional weight; for every step upward he slipped half a step back. He halted again and again. When he reached the top he sat down. Among the trenches and wire, he lost his way, knew that he had lost it, and not seeming to care, plodded on, up and down, in any direction, aimlessly. He was dazed, aware that he was no longer quite himself, but not worrying about that either. Then shells began to burst, and he thought dully and stupidly, "Oh, yes, the swine won't leave one alone. They go on shelling one."

Unexpectedly he found that he was walking on a path of trench boards, and after going along the boards some

distance he was blinded by a strong light flashed close into his eyes. It was an electric torch in the hands of a young officer, and as it turned away Bird saw that there were numbers of men sitting or sprawling on the trench boards. They were platoons belonging to a battalion just relieved, going back from the line, and they had halted here with no more care for the shells than Bird had shown. Worn out, smothered in mud, ghastly, dreadful, they sat there, while the young man and his sergeant coaxed them rather than ordered them to get up and go on. For a moment Bird had a strong illusion that they were really some of those dead men whom he had seen in the afternoon, now being paraded here for a mysterious resuscitation, and he thought, "It's no use. They won't fight again. They've had enough of it." Then he understood the facts of the case, and quite idiotically asked the platoon commander if he had seen his horses or happened to know where they were. The young man said no. "Well, if you see my chap, tell him I'm looking for him. Captain Bird—'the Bird,' as they call me—attached to D. H. Q. I'm tired and I want my horses." The young man advised him that there was a sort of stony path on their left and that it led to the river; and then with a violent torrent of oaths he turned to his men. "Get up. Here's D. Company right on top of us." They got up then, and shambled on with a clatter of side arms and mess tins; and Bird, who had stepped back, vaguely distinguished many more men coming toward him along the boards, and thought: "It's fall in, the corpses, what! They won't let 'em rest. They'll have every dead man on his feet before the night's over."

He struggled on among the half-filled trenches, plunging deep into holes and clambering breathlessly up banks of loose earth, stopped by wire and forced to turn every

minute; then by pure chance he stumbled out of these difficulties, and was walking on harder ground and kicking his encumbered toes against lumps of stone. He was on the path spoken of by the angry young man. The night had unaccountably become star-lit, and a preternatural silence fell upon the hill and the valley. "Or have I gone deaf?" thought Bird, with a catch in the breath and a husky sob. "Deaf—drums of the ear done for—never to hear a sound again. No one cares what happens to people out here."

He talked aloud now; and, although he continued to move, he felt a shuddering horror of the silence, of the faint light that lessened the obscurity on this path, of the immense darkness that surrounded it, of this fatigue that ate at the very marrow of his spine, of all things far or near, perceptible or imperceptible. "What the devil's this, too?" he said plaintively. "First time I've cried for years." He could feel the tears trickling down his cheeks, filling his mouth, choking him. It seemed a swift collapse of physical and mental strength; while it lasted he had the sensations that belong to a worn-out old man and those of a little child; it was the result of strain, not of fear. Or rather, no surface fear mingled with it, and yet the thing itself was largely caused by the deep subconscious fear that had been racking him for many hours. No living organism can go through these long encounters with death, and yet not be afraid. Death is too big, too tremendous; it shakes the soul of men even while it leaves them outwardly unchanged. It can be defied, but it must be dreaded. And to-night death like a monstrous, invisible black cat had been playing with men in the darkness as if they were so many mice. "Not fair," said Bird, in a queer whimpering voice and trying to gulp down his tears. "Damnably unfair at my age. They all know

I'm too old for the job. . . . Yet they make me do things—outside the regulations. Making me shoot animals. I'm fond of animals—always have been. Put them out of their misery, yes. But it's more than I can bear when I see a horse or a mule with its jaws wide open screaming at me. Only I don't hear it scream now. I shall never hear anything more. They have deafened me."

As suddenly as the trouble had come upon him it went. As if the tears had refreshed him, as if the transient loss of self-control had relaxed all the nervous strain, as if the whimpered lament had cleared his brain, he was himself again, thinking sanely and sensibly. And almost in the moment of his recovery, he saw something like a mound of earth with two vaguely comfortable shapes beside it, and heard the unmistakable sounds of horses champing their bits and a man softly whistling.

"That you, Miller?"

"Yes, sir." The voice of the orderly came strong and cheerful, and he moved toward Bird with his horses.

"Been all right here?"

"Yes, quite, sir. But it was pretty bad down there, wasn't it, sir?"

"Rather warm," said Bird. "Distinctly warm. Got my flask? . . . I'll have a swig."

Oh, the relief of being carried instead of having to walk. The orderly took the mud off his boots, helped him up to the saddle, put his feet in the stirrups. The guns were banging away gaily as they rode down toward the river, and Bird loved the sound of them. He could hear everything; he was absolutely all right, only very tired. Down near the water they were upon the one solid road of the locality, and Bird stuck in his spurs and trotted along, upward again toward high ground. He

was riding into the flash and roar of our own guns all about the village ruins. At the top of the road, where a sentry challenged him, he looked back toward the pandemonium that he had left behind. The sky still glowed, the shell-bursts came as dull reverberations, the enemy guns made a flutter of distant wrath. Every trace of that nonsensical emotion had left him; he was calm and matter of fact; but he said to himself with a swelling fervour of gratitude, "Thank God I got out of it alive. Thank God I need never go back there again. Thank God the division is relieved to-morrow."

He reported at the divisional dump, obtained tots of rum for himself and his servant, and was on the point of dismissing the horses and retiring among the ammunition boxes to the obscure corner which he and other officers used as their bedroom, when suddenly he remembered Heber. Not a single thought of Heber had been in his mind since that moment when the awful racket began, and, seeing mules far ahead of him on the slope, he had said to himself: "It is Willy leading us—but does he know the way?"

Bird got a fresh electric torch, mounted again, and rode off through the ruins toward the semi-morass that served as wagon lines for Heber's crowd. Tired as he was, he felt he could not lie down before being certain that the old chap had returned safely. He was immediately reassured by a sergeant that the gunner line-guard turned out for him. Heber, it was said, came back ages ago. He was no doubt sleeping comfortably in his wagon.

But now Bird felt that he could not be really satisfied until he had said a word to his friend, and much against the sergeant's desire, he insisted upon being taken to

Heber's wagon. Another non-com. had to be roused to identify the wagon. Then at last Bird lifted the tarpaulin sheet and turned the light of his torch into the dark recesses of the wagon. Two officers were sleeping there; but neither of them was Heber.

"Where is he then?" asked Bird. "You say you saw him?"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant grumblingly. "I'm pretty near sure I saw him."

"You said you were quite sure. Why the devil did you say so if you weren't certain?"

"*I* never seen him," said the corporal.

Bird insisted then on searching other wagons, and there were angry growls and much army language in dark places. Voices told him to get out and be damned; men, not knowing or pretending not to know that he was an officer, cursed him roundly for breaking their hard-earned rest.

Heber was not there. Heber was not in the village. Bird hunting for him in every likely corner was possessed by a most dreadful fear—not elemental and organic like the fear of hot limb-tearing death to oneself, but a reasoned, logical dread of a most probable disaster to a loved comrade. And remorse mingled with the fear. He thought: "The poor old chap went forward on purpose. He knew that we were going to catch it, and he thought he'd take it first. It was for my sake. He was trying to help me—to prevent me making a hash of it. He led us because he thought I wasn't really capable of leading. . . . And he was right. His mules gave me the direction when I'd lost it."

There were two or three advanced dressing-stations in the village, and Bird went to each; bothering the medical officers and orderlies with his agitated questions, turning

his electric torch upon many a bandaged face as the stretchers were carried out and pushed like long trays upon the shelves of the motor ambulances. Calculating time, he thought that if Heber had been knocked over anywhere near that infernal roadway by the high bank they might have brought him here already. On the other hand, if he was hit anywhere upon that hell-swept slope, they would not yet have found him. He would be lying there now, helpless, desperately but perhaps not fatally wounded, giving a faint shout for aid from minute to minute, or unconscious, with the life blood slowly oozing from him into his bed of cold slime.

Bird resolved that without a moment's further delay he must go back to look for him.

He felt no fatigue now, only the fear—and a frenzy of haste to cover the ground, to get back to the full roar of those dull, reverberating sounds; to pass once more through the winding path where death capered and leapt in the darkness, where the solid earth changed to burning dust and danced above one's crouched spine, where the whole world swung over one's head and round under one's feet; to get back, back as fast as was humanly possible, to all that he had thanked a merciful God he need never meddle with again.

He told his servant he did not require him and they parted at the top of the village, but Bird's horse, a common brute, stuck in its toes and tried to refuse the journey.

"Give me your stick."

And with stick and spurs, Bird got moving.

"Friend," he yelled to the challenging sentry. "Who do you think I am—the German Emperor? Get out of the light you —— fool."

They were shelling the valley now; some trees and the

remnants of a railway station by the river had taken fire, and Bird's horse again refused the job, sticking in its toes, grunting, turning about on the hard, firm road. Bird belaboured it, worked his spurs, yelled, and at a nearer shell-burst the brute seemed to go mad and dashed ahead in a wild gallop. So they went, making the sparks fly, hell for leather, amid the curses and shouts of plodding infantry; by a miracle avoiding collision with some gun teams and limbers, till, somewhere down by the river, where it was pitch dark beneath shattered walls and hanging roofs, the horse slackened its speed and its rider resumed control of it. A little farther on there were innumerable dug-outs by the road, with shelters for battalions in reserve, some advanced brigade headquarters, and several medical aid-posts. Bird trying to tie his horse to something lost it altogether; with the reins over its head, it jerked itself free and galloped off homeward. He let it go without regret, since he could use it no longer.

At these dug-outs and among the wounded there was no news of Heber.

Bird climbed upward, reached the high ground and the labyrinthine entanglements of the old German trenches. He was wet with perspiration, breathless, his heart hammering at his ribs, and yet he felt totally unconscious of fatigue. It was quiet up here; no shelling, star-light and silence. As if guided now by an instinct that could not fail, he made his way unerringly through the trenches and came out upon the slope; and slowly, methodically, he began to search it. It was, of course, a hopeless task. Wandering round the shell holes, slipping and scrambling, he could but examine one hole out of five hundred; and Heber might have been in any of the others. Every now and then men came by—signallers, sappers, despatch

runners, the myrmidons of war—and he asked them eagerly if they had seen or heard anything of the officer he wanted. They scarcely answered. In a moment they were gone, like phantoms hurrying away from graves that had been sacrilegiously burst open. At intervals he called out: "Heber. Are you there, Willy? Any one here? Heber—Heber."

Thus he worked very slowly down to the roadway, and pausing for a moment looked at his wrist-watch. It was close on dawn. The rage of the night had already ceased; all would be quiet now until friend and foe stood-to, and a splutter of rifles and machine guns announced the beginning of another day. There was no activity on the road, but one could hear the clink of picks and shovels all along the hill-side where men in hundreds dug with unremitting zeal. He wandered down the road disconsolately, still asking his questions, going into shelter-holes and flashing his lamp upon the recumbent forms.

Then, in the entrance of another aid-post, he felt a thrill of hope. A man just inside was coughing and talking. The voice, the cough! "What is it?" somebody asked the man; and the man, first coughing and clearing his throat, said: "I am hunting for Captain Bird, A. S. C. but attached to D. H. Q., wounded or killed not far from here."

It was Heber—Heber, safe, uninjured; laughing hysterically instead of coughing, but pretending to be very angry, as Bird pulled him through the dug-out doorway into the open air.

"You utter ass," said Heber. "Why do you scare people like this? What Tom-fool game have you been playing? Why couldn't you get back with everybody else?"

"I did, Willy. I did," said Bird, patting him to make sure that the whole of Heber was there, feeling his arms

and legs, and then hopping up and down exactly as small children hop in a paroxysm of innocent joy. "I went to your lines, but you weren't there. Then I got frightened —and came back again."

They had each done the same thing. Heber had failed, just as Bird had failed, to find his friend in the village, and thinking almost everything that Bird had thought, set out to hunt for him. And the joy that they both felt was exactly similar in its exquisite completeness. But with this access of delight came a swift reaction of nerves and will-power. Their energy, like a string overstretched, quivered and abruptly snapped.

"I'm done, Birdie," Heber moaned.

"So am I, Willy"

"I must lie down. I can't take another step."

They crept together into the mouth of one of those narrow tunnels made by the Germans, a tunnel leading perhaps to a boarded chamber; but they did not trouble to explore farther. They sank side by side on the earth floor of the passage, and slept.

CHAPTER XXI

THEIR experience of life at the front came to an end soon after the withdrawal of the division. Bird was summoned to an interview with the general—not merely a brigadier-general, as he never failed to explain in subsequent years, but the major-general commanding the division—and this kindly potentate suggested that perhaps they might now find him work to do at a comfortable distance from the scene of active operations.

Bird's servant had dressed him very carefully for the occasion; his buttons shone, his boots were beautifully polished, the peculiar glazed collar affected by his corps was of the latest pattern. He stood very erect, with his shortened moustache protruding stiffly, and he spoke in his best military fashion.

"With all respect, sir, may I venture to ask"—and at each word his plump cheeks grew pinker—"if it is considered I have failed in any of the duties I have had the honour to be entrusted with?"

The general said no, he had received the best possible reports about Bird, it was only the question of age; and he paid Bird a compliment—"a devilish handsome compliment," as Bird was fond of saying afterward, although rigorously refusing to repeat it in substance.

At the moment he said: "If it is only age—if that is all, sir—I should beg to be allowed to remain with the division."

But the general said no again. "My dear fellow, the

spirit is willing—I know that—but the flesh, the flesh! This is a young man's job."

"Ah, *anno domini*," said Bird, with a respectfully facetious grimace. "Anno domini," and he repeated the words sadly. "I suppose I must plead guilty there. But"—and he brightened—"but, if I may say so, sir, that applies to a friend of mine even more than it does to me. Heber, sir! Heber of the D. A. C.—two years older than me. Now, if you could find something easier for *him*——"

"We have done so," said the general. "Heber left the division yesterday—and you are to go to-morrow."

Then Bird was glad, and he permitted the general to detect his gladness.

The remainder of the war was easy for the Captains Bird and Heber. They drifted away farther and farther from all that noise and slaughter, until they became stationary in the neighbourhood of Boulogne—Bird as commandant of some newly erected baths, and Heber as something that had to do with railways. The glorious health-giving atmosphere of the war was still theirs to breathe, and Boulogne itself seemed social, gay, delightful. They often took their meals, and sometimes gave charming little dinner-parties, at the Hôtel Folkestone.

One day when they were dining there by themselves, Heber, smiling darkly and enigmatically, but without the least embarrassment, drew Bird's attention to a copy of the *Times*. "Read this"; and he laid the top of his skinny forefinger on the first column of the newspaper.

As he read the announcement Bird started, although he knew, of course, that the *decree nisi* had recently been made absolute.

"Well, I'm bothered. This takes the biscuit."

Mrs. Heber had married again. Bird, with goggling

eyes, re-read what the advertisement told him:—"*Thorpe: Denham.* On the 18th, June. . . . Second Lieutenant Adolphus Thorpe, M. C., Rifle Brigade, to Clarice, widow of Gerald Denham Denham. . . ."

"It beats everything," said Bird. "And d'you notice she washes you out altogether, Willy? Starts the new race under the Denham colours again! . . . Thorpe? Who the dickens is Thorpe? I don't seem to remember the name. Were you—ah—prepared for it?"

"Why are you so inquisitive?" said Heber. "What's it got to do with you? Mind your own business."

But in this marvellous war-atmosphere, with everybody brought down to elemental facts, the old reticences and delicate shynesses of a highly organized civilization had no place; and Bird therefore refused to be put off or rebuffed.

"Rot," he said cheerily. "You've done with her for good and all—and you certainly don't regret it. So why be squeamish? Was Master Thorpe one of the lot that used to hang on after her?"

"No," said Heber, smiling gravely. "Thorpe was too young for that"; and he paused and shrugged his shoulders. "She knew his people. Thorpe was quite a little boy; and she made Tony, as a big boy, look after him at Harrow. How time flies. Now, it seems, the infant has come to man's estate. Plucky kid, too! Military cross! Poor little devil"; and he sighed.

Bird sat nodding his head and murmuring. "Undefeated. I always said so. Simply undefeatable"; and he stared across the crowded, brilliantly lit room, as if everything had vanished and he was seeing visions.

After the Armistice, when Bird was about to be demobilized, the authorities still clung to Heber. They maintained that they were letting go people of his sort

only for the most special and urgent reasons. But then Bird had an inspiration that would not have disgraced a genius.

"Why don't you say you're a literary man? They're afraid of the press. If I were you, I should tell 'em you're writing a book. Yes, tell 'em you're writing the 'Life of Robespierre'—and the publishers insist upon your getting on with it."

Heber followed this advice and obtained his freedom.

They went straight back to Skeffington Park, and for the third time established the joint household. Now at last they might fairly hope that fate would leave them in it unmolested.

And with them, as with everybody else, the lessons of the war—if in truth there were any lessons—soon grew weak, weaker still, and then became of no effect at all. There was, everyone felt, a little difficulty in picking up the threads of life, a reluctance to admit that nothing had changed either in oneself or outside oneself, and also a faint sense of disappointment when the admission had been made.

Thus Bird wrote in his diary under a date of 1919: "I often thought in France when I was feeling so fit and my nerves were in such splendid condition that I should find my golf improved when I took it up again. But this has not happened. I am not playing any better."

On the other hand, as has been already mentioned, he did not play any worse. The order issued by the drill-sergeant Destiny to him and the rest of the world appeared to be neither more nor less than "As you were." In such matches as were played out to a finish and not abandoned owing to acrimonious disagreement the results were extraordinarily equal. Now Heber won, now Bird.

They squabbled as they had always squabbled; and as year after year passed, the insulting things that they said to each other were more and more distressing to uninterested bystanders.

They had trouble with servants; and Bird accused Heber of bullying, and Heber said Bird's attitude to their domestic staff was that of a sycophantic worm. For Heber, who had been glad to sleep in wagons instead of on the bare ground, would now almost break a housemaid's heart when he fancied she had made his bed carelessly, and no recollections of an unfilled stomach curbed his critical tongue when he considered that the cook had served an ill-dressed meal; nor could the memory of dangers shared in common prevent Bird from saying that Heber's idiotic fussiness and hateful, bad temper made life a burden to everyone within reach of him. Yet notwithstanding all this, every day, every year, they were fonder of each other, more necessary to each other.

Very unfortunately, although everything great and soul-lifting in the war was passing from the tablets of men's minds, Bird continued to remember many of its most trivial circumstances, and about these he would chat interminably whenever a chance offered, twaddling on with one "funny thing" after another that had befallen a man called Passingham in such-and-such a division on a certain long march, or him, Bird, himself in billets at such-and-such a village. "I give you my word it's true. Bless my soul, yes—and I can tell you a funnier thing than that. Listen to this. . . ."

Probably the great bulk of good-natured people who now and then bore the company in which they find themselves never at any time guess that they are boring or have bored; but very few of them escape being aware of something vaguely wrong. Bird, whose good-nature was al-

most limitless, dimly perceived that between him and others there occurred a mysterious kind of failure. It was not when cut short in a narration, or when listeners yawned in his face, or when they left the room while he was still speaking; but more generally when he noticed, with surprise, a hesitation in jumping at some frank offer of his society, a pause, a silence, just when he was expecting encouragement or applause. He felt at these moments as if a semi-transparent screen had interposed itself, as if a chilliness was falling or a ground mist was rising—and he wondered if he had quite unintentionally given offence, or wounded somebody's susceptibleness for lack of sufficient attention. It used to be a passing discomfort, at once forgotten, and not remembered till it came again. Such as it was, it worried him a little; but at the same time it seemed to draw him closer still to Heber and make him rely on Heber with, if possible, a greater strength. Once he spoke of it.

"Those fellows, Willy! So stand-offish. Almost as if they didn't *want* me—or had had enough of one."

Heber luminously suggested that Bird talked too much of his career as a soldier.

"Still keep something to yourself you will not tell to any," said Heber, quoting poetry; and he went on with impressive graveness: "All my life I have thought that there are certain things which one should put right behind one and never speak of again."

"I know," said Bird, impressed. "It is what you have always said. And I believe you're right, Willy—yes, you're absolutely right."

And after this Bird tried hard not to talk about the war; but, alas, one cannot record that he succeeded. He soon relapsed, badly, and talked about it as much as, if not more than, ever.

Then in the summer of 1922 Heber fell ill during their annual visit to Beach End, and scared Bird terribly by spitting one or two drops of blood. As soon as the hotel physician consented Bird brought the patient home to Skeffington Park, where he received attendance at the skilled hands of Dr. McGrigor who came over from Tudor Green every day.

Dr. McGrigor—a friend, a golf-player, a true *man*—pronounced that Heber had had "a very nasty turn," but with care they would soon patch him up again. The trouble was pleurisy combined with liver mischief. As to the terrifying blood-stains on the patient's handkerchief, they were of no consequence. It appeared that Heber had contracted a habit of gnashing his teeth in sleep, probably when irritated by the fretful nature of his dreams, and he had thus torn the gums on one side of his mouth.

"*What* a coincidence!" said Bird. "I mean, this happening at the same time as the other thing, but not having anything to do with it really. Only, I say, McGrigor"; and he puffed out his cheeks and spoke severely. "Between you and me and the post, that Beach End fellow must be a thorough ass. An *alarmist*, too! He saw how anxious I was."

Since the patient must lie in bed for a week or two, Dr. McGrigor proposed to send a nurse; but neither Heber nor Bird would agree to this arrangement.

"If Bird doesn't mind the trouble," said Heber, looking at them mournfully from the bed.

"Of course, I don't mind," said Bird. "You know that very well."

Bird, then, continued to act as the most assiduous of nurses; and although supported by the doctor's favourable opinion, he felt sometimes a return of his fears.

Heber now was so abnormally gentle, so pitiably meek. In the course of one long day he never said a single rude word.

But at the end of a fortnight Bird met McGrigor with a radiant face.

"He's heaps better, doctor. I'm certain he's round the corner now."

After his visit to the sick room Dr. McGrigor entirely confirmed Bird's diagnosis.

"He may sit up for an hour or so. To-morrow or next day we'll have him downstairs"; and he talked to Bird concerning the future in the most hopeful manner.

Late that evening Heber asked Bird to read to him, and Bird did so. But after a little while Heber stopped the reading with an almost atrocious rudeness. He said that Bird knocked the sense out of sentences that would be comprehensible to a half-witted scullery maid, and that, moreover, he had a talent for the discovery of the most piffling books that have ever been written.

Bird smoothed his pillows, arranged the bed clothes, and advised him to "go to by-by."

"Birdie!" Heber had stretched out his hand from under the quilt, and Bird squeezed it. "I'm sorry I said that about the books."

"Oh, but I'm glad," said Bird heartily; "I'm delighted. It shows that you really are more like yourself. You know what I mean—not so down on your luck. . . . Good-night."

Still later, after twelve o'clock, when Heber was comfortably asleep, Bird sat in his easy chair downstairs meditating and sipping whisky and water. All the windows of their little house stood open; and outside them the autumn night was very beautiful, warm as summer, filled with a soft gray silence far and near. Bird went

to a window and looked out, at tall trees in the park, the shimmer on the smooth turf, the dark masses of shadow that he knew to be shrubs and flowering plants; and there crept toward him that all-embracing, all-penetrating sadness that lurks in the very beauty of such nights, and creeps into your inmost heart whenever you confront them by yourself and think about them quietly. Sitting again, after replenishing his glass, he thought of the wide, silent country that lay beyond all this small familiar bit of ground—seas and countries—and again more land and water—and beyond, still beyond, space—more space—unmeasured distance and endless time. With this sensation of the immensities surrounding him, he thought of the utter emptiness of his poor little world if Heber was taken from him.

"No," he thought, "if W. H. had slipped away, I shouldn't have been long in following him. I couldn't have gone on with it by myself."

But it was all right—quite all right. McGrigor had said that Willy would last for a good few years yet. Bird went round the house, closing all the windows and pulling down all the blinds, shutting out the night, shutting himself in with his friend.

Then he clicked off the electric light, and spoke to himself in a darkness that was not really darkness because every inch of the place was known to him and he could move anywhere in it unfalteringly.

"Some happy years before us both yet, old boy."

THE END